



# JEEVADHARA

## ECO-JUSTICE

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Edited by  
Felix Wilfred

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A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

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## Eco-Justice

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## Editorial

This issue is an attempt to widen the scope of justice by drawing into the picture the truth of human beings in their relationship to all creatures inhabiting the Earth. They have their claims too - to be, to live and to flourish, which is no prerogative of the humans alone. Eco-justice gives expression to this truth and to these claims. The just concluded Copenhagen Summit has necessitated a deeper reflection on eco-justice going beyond ad hoc solutions to ecological crisis and climate change.

The first article by me tries to expand the concept of justice and shows the need for widening our vision, values, and our understanding of community, development, etc. in the light of a new paradigm of Human-Earth relationship. The emergence of this new vision calls for the contribution of religious traditions, and its realization a new educational praxis. Paul Appasamy in his contribution looks at the various measures to check the environmental degradation like state legislations, economic instruments like taxation, and concludes pointing out that, in the indigenous tradition, we have community-based mechanisms to foster ecological conditions such as village maintenance of irrigation tanks, community-based regulation of fishing rights.

Wati Longchar takes the discourse further by presenting to us the ecological experience of primeval people, their vision and values. We note in their value-system and way of life eco-justice in practice. There persists a close bond of human beings with the land, with the Earth. Nirmal Selvamony gives us another revealing example from the experience of Tamil people in their classical tradition. In this tradition, the identity of human beings is not caste-based or religion-oriented but tied to the bioregion to which one belongs - coastal, mountainous, desert or agricultural terrains. In interaction with the land, its flora and fauna a culture and way of life is shaped.

The next two essays take us to the experience of women in relation to nature and environment. Kochurani Abraham critiques some of the generally held views of eco-feminists, and points out new directions in relating women to the Earth. Swarnalatha on her part, introduces us to a re-reading of a classical text – Ramayana – from a feminist and ecological perspective, and shows the richness of some contemporary feminist interpretation of this great epic.

Religious traditions could help us deepen the question of eco-justice. V.J. John studies the nature images of Jesus in the New Testament, and shows how Jesus was close to life of the peasants of his time and how from his experience of nature culled out images for his sublime teachings. Even more, his reversal parables situated in the context of nature portrayed the subversive power of the Kingdom of God – his central message and quest.

These essays do not claim to have exhausted the theme of eco-justice. Rather, they serve as stimuli and inspiration for deepening our vision and intensifying our struggles for eco-justice. It will be seen in these articles how eco-justice and social justice are so intertwined that one cannot be sought without the other. Relating the two is a great challenge before humanity. I hope that the reflections set forth in the following pages will be of some help to the readers to rethink their relations to the Earth and contribute to the praxis of both eco-justice and social justice.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to the distinguished authors who have made their original contributions from different perspectives. I am grateful to S. Nesamony for his immense and highly reliable help in going through the manuscripts, editing them and preparing them for the press. Flora showed deep interest in the theme of the present issue ever since I sounded it to her, and has been assisting me in contacting the writers and getting the articles in time. I appreciate her contribution, and wish to thank her also for her valuable assistance in finalizing the editing work.



## *Eco-Justice*

# Expanding the Horizons for a Common Future

**Felix Wilfred**

The author is Founder-Director of Asian Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies, Chennai. In this contribution he tries to widen the conception of justice on the basis of the primordial bonds of the humans with the Earth, which with its biotic and abiotic creatures has right to be, to live and to flourish, which cannot be set aside by the humans. Realization of eco-justice calls for broadening of the prevalent understanding of common good, community, development etc. The pursuit of eco-justice needs to be supported by a synergy of various disciplines, including theology and by a new educative praxis. The reflections made here make us also see how eco-justice and social justice are intertwined.

In these initial years of twenty-first century, we are in the face of two great crises: The one relates to the ordering of relationships among the humans in a just and equitable manner; the second one concerns the way human beings relate to nature and Mother Earth. There is a threatening deficit on both these counts, and the crisis assumes ever greater dimensions. The past few millennia have been a struggle to establish justice in the human community, and it is far from being achieved. The second agenda of justice – that of relationship of the humans to the Earth has just begun. Before the night falls, there is the urgency to direct our attention to this crisis and engage in struggle for justice.

The just concluded Copenhagen Summit was a frantic effort to make up for what humans continue to inflict on nature with disastrous consequence for all creatures.<sup>1</sup> Even the measures and strategies projected to be endorsed by the Summit – and which woefully fell short of the minimum – are far from adequate to come to terms with the magnitude of the ecological problems and the convulsion of climate changes. They touch only the surface, and do not seem to address deeper questions underlying the crisis of the relationship of humans to the Earth.

Moving towards the future, calls for a change of vision, perspectives, values and human conduct vis-à-vis the Earth. The present article wants to be a small contribution by way of reflecting how we need to expand our horizons in understanding justice, so as to comprise Human-Earth relationship. This latter relationship is covered by eco-justice.

### **A Limited Understanding of Justice**

Let me begin with a reference to a recently published work by Amartya Sen, and entitled “*The Idea of Justice*”.<sup>2</sup> It evokes immediately in our mind another work by an illustrious thinker John Rawls “*A Theory of Justice*”<sup>3</sup> on which Sen builds his own ideas. His emphasis is on the role of public reasoning in the realization of justice. According to him, though perfect justice may elude us, what we can try through public reasoning is to move from less to more justice. He also notes how we need to go beyond a parochial approach to justice to address global issues of justice. The work of Sen, in spite of its ponderous scholarship, has two serious limitations. First of all, his consideration of justice has strong Western philosophical tradition as its background – both classical and modern – and is heavily centred on reason as the point of reference for elaborating the idea of justice.

A second serious limitation will be obvious to anyone who reads it in the light of the present-day situation of humanity and of nature.

1 Cf. Chitra Ganesh, “Come Let Us Join Hands to Save the Earth”, in *The Hindu*, December 20, 2009, p.18;

2 Cf. Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Penguin Books, London, 2009.

3 Cf. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Revised Edition, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2003.



There are hardly four pages devoted to the environmental issues,<sup>4</sup> and even those few pages do not address the question with the seriousness they deserve. Nor does he go into the intimate connection of poverty and environmental degradation. In short, one remains with the impression that the issue of ecology and nature is out of the purview of justice, which is an intra-human reality. It is surprising that a book of four hundred and sixty pages could be written on justice today with such scant attention to ecological and environmental questions. Given the inextricable link of social justice to ecological justice, the absence of the latter in the theoretical framework of Sen is highly regrettable.

### Inter-dependence – The Macro Picture

The awareness of interdependence among the humans brought about a sense of solidarity and the realization that common is the destiny of human beings. The tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought home powerfully the truth of the unity of humankind, and how destructive powers could wipe out the entire human species. Even as we struggle to give expression to human sustainability through regulating inter-relationships in peace and justice, we are confronted more and more with the truth of how human beings are dependent on the Earth, its products, the biosphere and the ecosystems. However, it has not sunk deep into the consciousness of humanity.

For the practice of eco-justice we need to equip ourselves with a vision of unity of the entire reality.<sup>5</sup> We are assisted in this through important resources. The vision of Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism and primeval religious traditions show how we human beings are part of a web of intricate relationships constituting the whole universe and the Earth, and how all creatures – biotic and a-biotic – depend on one another for their wellbeing and flourishing.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, modern scientific

4 Cf. Amartya Sen, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-252.

5 It is important to note that eco-justice is different from *environmental justice*.

6 Cf. Roger S. Gottlieb (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006; Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker (eds.), *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, Centre for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, Cambridge, 2000.

discoveries show more and more clearly that the Earth is not an inert material to be acted upon by human beings, but presents itself as a mega-organism with all its parts held through a delicate balancing, and it resembles less and less machine. As a creative organism the Earth brings forth new species and genera, and dissolves them into itself. This continuous process of creation from the womb of the Earth and dissolution makes it into a vibrant reality. Human beings are part and parcel of the Earth and its processes.<sup>7</sup> The tragedy of modernity is that it has widened the gap between the humans and the nature, and we need to recover a vision that brings them together.

### **From Human Community to Earth Community**

If such is the intimate relationship between humans and the Earth, then the understanding of community requires a widening. Communion and community are no more to be viewed as inter-human realities; they need to be taken as applying to the relationship of humans to the Earth with all biotic and a-biotic realities inhabiting in its womb.<sup>8</sup> Such a communal attitude towards all creatures would contribute to the promotion of eco-justice. There is solidarity among all life-forms on Earth which share many things in common, including the genetic code. Human body shares the power of nature in its composition of water, air and other elements of the Earth. If the Earth is made of two-thirds of water, the same composition is mirrored in human body. Eco-justice happens when human communion and solidarity with all living and inanimate nature contributes to the maintenance of the whole Earth in its ecosystems, equilibrium and balance. Eco-injustice creeps in when this balance and interdependence is tilted, and the relationship of the humans to nature is hierarchized.

### **From Stewardship to Kinship**

The ideology that has contributed to ecological crisis today has three streams of praxis flowing from a hierarchical mode of thought.

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7 Cf. D.C. Srivastava (ed.), *Readings in Environmental Ethics: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur and New Delhi, 2005.

8 Cf. John A. Grim (ed.), *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology. The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*, Centre for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, Cambridge, 2001.

In the Hebrew thought, man is at the helm of the hierarchy, ruling over the family, the women, the slaves etc. He represents the rule of God in the world by ruling over nature. A second stream of thought is of Greek origin with its dualism of body and soul. The soul finds its true destiny by escaping from nature, creation and the world. A third source is from the Western Enlightenment tradition which makes a stark contrast between nature and history. It is not nature, but history that is the realm of human beings and their agency, and they affirm their sovereignty over nature by intervening in it through exercise of their freedom.

The confluence of these three streams have created a forceful current in Christian tradition that set aside the truth of the communion of human beings with Earth, its elements and living beings. Foregrounding the reality of Earth-community and placing human beings within it called for a re-interpretation of the Biblical texts, especially of Genesis (cf. Gen 1:26-28). Biblical scholars sensitive to the ecological issues tell us how God's command to Adam needs to be interpreted not as a domineering over nature and creation, but to be read as a call to stewardship.

This clarification is important, but inadequate to respond to the crisis of today. We need to strengthen this interpretation from other insights of the Bible. In this respect we may note how in the creation account, God is portrayed as someone working – creation is the work of God. The truth of this statement stands out when we realize that in ancient societies – both in the East and the West – not working but to be at leisure (the so-called “leisured class”) was the mark of superiority and it belonged to the high classes. God does not assume this high class character but is depicted as someone who works, and God also rests on the seventh day (cf. Gen 2:1-3; cf. also Ex 2:2). This is a pattern that forms part of the entire creation and nature. The Earth works but it also needs to rest, just like human beings. So then we have the injunctions that the land be periodically left fallow, so that its regenerative capacity is increased (cf. Ex 23:12; Lev 25:8-55). So, too, human communities get regenerated by overcoming the accumulation of wealth, usurpation of land etc. and by creating a fresh situation for the flourishing of everyone, which is the meaning of the



Jubilee. Here we have both eco-justice and social justice, and in both cases there is a common pattern at work. Eco-justice is practiced when human beings respect the rhythm of nature and its dynamics.

In this way, the Earthy-community lives in communion, peace and harmony. This requires that we go beyond mere stewardship approach to nature – which would be still infected by anthropocentrism – and move towards *kinship with the Earth*.<sup>9</sup> Kinship expresses the reality of inter-dependence of the humans and the nature. We need to draw inspiration also from different religious traditions. In the Christian tradition we have the sublime example of St Francis of Assisi who dealt with all creation – with birds, fishes and animals – in a relationship of kinship, and could address the sun as brother and moon as sister. A nurturing and caring attitude and praxis towards all creatures is an expression of spirituality and spiritual childhood.<sup>10</sup>

### **From Common Good to the Good of the Earth**

If the chords that bind humans and the Earth in kinship is so strong, it follows that the pursuit of good needs to benefit both human beings and nature. The alarming speed with which technology is moving, exploits nature in the belief that in this way common good of human beings is assured. In the view of the Greek thinker Aristotle, given the fact that people are by nature social and are bound up with the *polis* (city-state), they need to share their lives with others, going beyond the conception of good life each one may have, and this came to signify the common good. The forum for the pursuit of this common good was the public sphere. However, in a city of exclusion – of women, slaves and other weaker sections – the common good had a limited understanding even within the human community. It was basically the good sought and shared by the *males* of the city.

From a theoretical point of view, the concept of common good has widened in modern times with a renewed understanding of justice in an inclusive way. It came to signify the good of everyone irrespective

9 Cf. John Hart, "Catholicism", in Roger S. Gottlieb (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, pp. 65-91

10 We need to keep alive our senses to forge true kinship with the Earth and nature.

of the class, race, gender etc. It got further expanded with the emergence of the consciousness that human beings share the same destiny. Consequently it was argued that common good is to be sought globally across national borders, given the growing interdependence of humanity.<sup>11</sup> It is enabled through a range of networks of communication in today's global world.

These developments on the understanding of common good may facilitate creation of solidarity among human beings. But the point is that the achievement of common good is today dependent upon the good of the Earth. In the past, the Earth and nature never came in the picture in this conceptualization of common good. Today, any understanding or discourse on common good remains woefully inadequate if it does not see the interdependence of humans and the nature. If we form a wider community with the Earth and all its life-forms, we may not pursue any common good among the humans that does not benefit the Earth. The nature with all its richness and rhythm is a participant in the common good. To the life of the Earth-community about which we mentioned earlier, there corresponds the quest of the good of the Earth indispensable for the good of the human community.

The pursuit of the good of the Earth takes place through a process of relationship – which we may call ecological relationship – that maintains a balance between the good of every part of the Earth-community including the humans. One way of understanding the formation of culture is to study what kind of relationships people in different bioregions and in biotic communities have fostered. Cultural differences depend to a large extent on the kind of relationships to nature, as for example in an agricultural community, in an industrial urban society or in a fishing community.

### **Beyond “Sustainable Development”**

“Sustainable development” is an expression in wide currency today, but also is quite vague. The objective of sustainable development resulted from the realization that there are “limits to growth”. The fact

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11 Cf. David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

that many things are technically possible need not mean that they should be actually realized, even if that were to harm the human welfare from a long-term perspective. The ideal of sustainable development is still very much tied to an anthropocentric vision of reality. The dominant concern here seems to be the survival of humanity which is not possible when the environment is damaged, or the resources of nature are overexploited.<sup>12</sup> Sustainable development does not focus on the present situation of poverty in a world where 20% of the population consumes 80% resources of nature. Sustainable development seems to be concerned more about *intergenerational equity* by which is meant that the use of natural resources be such that we leave behind for future generations resources and means necessary to fulfil their needs.<sup>13</sup> This is in fact, one of the central points of Brundtland Commission Report entitled "*Our Common Future*". Hence the restraint on development becomes imperative for human security. In fact, the Brundtland Report notes,

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: The concept of "needs", in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.<sup>14</sup>

Such an orientation, however, does not provide us the *vision* for eco-justice. It is possible only when we look at nature not as an instrument for the present and future human wellbeing and progress,

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12 Cf. Herman E. Daly, *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1996.

13 Human beings are not masters of nature but pilgrims who pass through the Earth as through an inn. We do not take away the bed sheets and blankets from the inn (!), but leave them for those who come after us. This is how St Augustine viewed the relationship of human beings to nature, namely in the manner of pilgrims.

14 *Our Common Future*. Report of the Brundtland Commission, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987.



but as having *value in itself*. Unfortunately even in Christian thinking, not to speak of Cartesian dualism, the whole reality was hierarchized in such a way that the lower forms in nature are to be of service to the higher ones, while all of them exist for the sake of human beings – a view held also by Thomas Aquinas. On the other hand, poets, artists and mystics view nature and the Earth as endowed with meaning and value in themselves and not in terms of their utility for human beings. This aesthetic perspective needs to percolate in all relationships of human beings to nature, including economic activity, and this would ultimately enhance and heighten the quality of human life which is not to be measured on the basis of the capacity to extract maximum benefit from nature. Such an orientation is conducive to the practice of eco-justice.

### **Ecological Economics**

The dominant model of market economy and liberal capitalism has failed in promoting social justice and eco-justice. Even more, the reigning paradigm of economy is at the root of social inequality and ecological injustice. Both are two sides of the same coin; you cannot have one without the other.

Ecological economics does not pretend to be value-free; its preference is evident: the well-being and sustainability of our household, planet Earth. Ecological economics is a human enterprise that seeks to maximize the optimal functioning of the planet's gifts and services for all users. Ecological economics, then, is first of all a vision of how human beings ought to live on planet Earth in light of the perceived reality of where and how we live. We live in, with, and from the Earth.<sup>15</sup>

Liberal economy is driven by the laws of demand and supply, by competition and by profit-considerations all of which have turned out to be prejudicial to the Earth and environment. Ecological economics<sup>16</sup>

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15 Paul F. Knitter – Chandra Muzaffar (eds), *Subverting Greed. Religious Perspectives on the Global Economy*, Orbis Books, New York, 2002, p. 127.

16 Ecological economics was initiated through the contribution of such thinkers as Kenneth E. Boulding, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, Herman Daly, and Robert Constanza.

on the other hand will attend to nature and the regenerative capacity of the resources of the Earth, and economic processes of production, distribution and consumption will be directed by these ecological concerns. Ecological economics will go into the study and analysis of the correlation between economic growth processes and eco-systems. More basically it will view both society and economics as subsets of the eco-system which is different from the misconception that they (society and economics) could function independently from the environment.<sup>17</sup> We need to view ecological economics as part of a new vision of reality and choice of different set of values.

### **Promotion of Biodiversity – Expression of Eco-Justice**

Cultural Darwinism created a hierarchy of cultures, and the progress of humanity was viewed as a movement from the “*savage*” state to the “*civilized*” one by adopting one single superior culture – which, of course, was the Western one. Thanks to the work of many committed anthropologists, it became clear that there are numerous cultures each one with its own specific characteristics, and they all manifest the richness of humankind. Today cultural pluralism is accepted at least in principle, and there are efforts to foster cultural diversity and build intercultural connections.

As a comprehensive term, biodiversity refers to genetic diversity, species diversity and ecosystem diversity. Promotion of biodiversity contributes to the life of the weaker and vulnerable sections of humanity. In fact some of the poorest and vulnerable groups live in areas with a lot of biodiversity and herbs and plants around them are important for their livelihood, for their healthcare etc. Tribals and indigenous peoples have closer knowledge of the various plants, and are familiar with their nutritional and medicinal values. Destroying biodiversity – fruit of 3.5 billion years of evolution - in the name of development or cultivating

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17 Cf. Mark Sagoff, *The Economy of the Earth: Philosophy, Law and the Environment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992; Sallie McFague, “God’s Household: Christianity, Economics, and Planetary Living”, in Paul F. Knitter and Chandra Muzaffar (eds.), *Subverting Greed: Religious Perspectives on the Global Economy*, Orbis Books, New York 2002, pp. 119-136.

monocultural cash-crops spells doom to biodiversity dependent population.<sup>18</sup>

One may recall here the tragic example of Irish famine of 1846 when millions died because only two varieties of potatoes were cultivated, not to mention the agricultural disasters in India and other tropical countries through the colonial practice of monoculture still profitably continued by agri-business. Conservation of the various species of flora and fauna is to defend both social justice and eco-justice. Moreover, given the fact that most of the medicines are created from bio-materials, the failure to conserve biodiversity is bound to reflect on the health care of the poor of the world an overwhelming majority of whom depend upon numerous medicinal plants. Promotion of eco-justice through biodiversity is an important way of bringing justice closer to the poor. The implementation of various conventions relating to conservation of biodiversity require a wider vision in which, as we noted earlier, the heritage of nature is acknowledged as having value in itself.

### Synergy for Eco-Justice

Promotion of eco-justice calls for the convergence of many forces from different quarters. The kind of transformations eco-justice implies warrant a change of paradigm. The question of the relationship of faith and reason has absorbed the Christian thinking for the past several centuries. It reflects a strong anthropocentrism in which the relationships are twofold, namely between the individual (or human community) and God and the relationship among the humans. There is today Christian faith – for that matter any religious faith – needs to not only add the new dimension of relationship of the *humans and the Earth*, but also make this the focal point from which to understand and define the other two relationships. This vision would create the environment and condition for the practice of eco-justice.

The practice of eco-justice calls for also continuous new inputs from science which presents to us more and more the complexity and intricacies of nature. The data it provides helps us widen our vision and understand the importance of the new paradigm. The present educational systems – both secular and theological – are not attuned

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18 Cf. Vandana Shiva, "Farmers' Rights, Biodiversity and International Treatises", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28,4 (3 April 1993) pp. 555-560.



to a new ecological vision. It fosters a culture of consumerism that lives on the exploitation of nature beyond its regenerative capacity. We need an education that will create a mindset of valuing nature in itself and nurturing it. A new educational process to be fostered at all levels will foreground the relationship of humans to nature, and the Earth will not be viewed simply as objects of technological exploitation.

Theology, as John Clammer rightly points out, is one of those sciences which has still the potential for an integral approach to reality.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, this potential remains untapped. Promoting a new vision of the interrelationship of the humans with nature remains one of the important tasks of theology today. In particular there is urgent need to rethink the narration of God in her relationship to the Earth and the whole creation in such a way that the mystery of the Divine is experienced immanently as present in nature and in its dynamism.<sup>20</sup> These perspectives will contribute both to social justice and eco-justice, since both are intertwined. Here we need to add also the importance of inter-religious sharing and conversation. One religious vision could be corrective to another one, and there could be mutual enrichment in relating to the environment.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

One of the things that is becoming more and more evident in today's world is that if we travel the way of social justice we will reach eco-justice; reversely if we promote eco-justice that is the path to social justice today. To put it in another way, the defence of the Earth and its ecosystem is the defence of the poor; and the defence of the poor implies the protection of the environment. For the people who suffer

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19 Cf. John Clammer, "Learning from the Earth: Reflections on Theological Education and the Ecological Crisis", in *Concilium* 2009/3, pp. 95-101.

20 The challenge to rethink the traditional Christian approach to God comes from the ecological crisis today as much as from the post-secular situation. On this latter point see Felix Wilfred, "Crisis in the Christian Narration of god and the Encounter of Religions in a Post-metaphysical World", in *Bangalore Theological Forum* vol. 41 (2009) No. 2, pp. 15-28 (This is a lecture originally delivered at Pontifical Catholic University, Rio de Janeiro and at the Department of Humanities, UNISINOS University, Porto Alegre, Brazil, respectively on 15<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> September, 2009).

21 Cf. Felix Wilfred, "Toward an Inter-religious Eco-theology" in *Concilium* 2009/3, pp. 43-54.

most from environmental degradation and climate change are the poor ones. *The failure of Copenhagen Summit is precisely in its reluctance to relate the poor to the ecological question and to face the implications of this relationship.*<sup>22</sup>

Our relationship to nature invariably rests on our unexpressed assumptions about our understanding of them, and the perspective from which we view them. The expansion of justice to include eco-justice helps us forge new relationships with the Earth, and it implies that we also widen our understanding of community, common good, development, etc. Basically there is the need to change the mode of our thinking and to acquaint ourselves to a new and different cosmology. It also calls for a shift from an instrumental approach to nature to an approach that would value the Earth and all its beings for what they are in themselves. The development of various disciplines, including theology, needs to rethink some of their foundational conceptions in consonance with the demands of eco-justice which should form part of the educational praxis at all levels.

Let me make one final point. The increasing violence we experience in the world has, of course its immediate causes. However, if we analyze in depth the escalation of violence and expansion of structures conducive to violence they have something to do with the whole environment of exploitation both in human communities and in the relationship of humans to nature. The schooling in violence begins from what humans do when they wantonly deal with the creation. A non-violent society and world will be a distant dream unless the humans begin to relive in harmony their relationship to the Earth and the entire creation.

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22 Cf. John Vidal, "Bolivia Stuns Climate Summit With Target", in *The Hindu*, December 18, 2009, p. 17; "No Hope in Copenhagen", Editorial, *The New Indian Express*, December 21, 2009, p. 8; Richard Black, "Why did Copenhagen Fail to Deliver a Climate Deal?", in *The Hindu*, December 24, 2009, p. 11; M.S. Swaminathan, "Copenhagen, Tsunami and Hunger", in *The Hindu*, December 26, 2009, p. 12.

# Natural Resources and Environmental Governance: An Economic Perspective

Paul P. Appasamy

The author is a well-known economist and the Vice-Chancellor of Karunya University, Coimbatore. In this contribution he characterizes the degradation of the environment – air pollution, soil erosion, deforestation, etc. as “Tragedy of the Commons”. Exploring the ways out of this tragedy, he points to state regulations which unfortunately are inflexible and ineffective. There are economic instruments to restrain the destruction such as emission taxes and eco taxes, and quantity instruments such as tradable permits/quotas. The author then goes on to show how in India there have been very effective traditional checks over common property resources (CPR) such as community-managed and controlled tank irrigation systems and community-approved and checked fishing rights in the coastal zones of the country. These are valuable examples for promotion of environmental goals today.

The Nobel Committee decided to award the 2009 Nobel Prize for Economic Sciences to Elinor Ostrom and Oliver Williamson for their path breaking contributions on the role of social organization in economics<sup>1</sup>. Neo-classical economics had given primacy to the role of the individual – *homo economicus* (economic man) in decision-

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1. Cf. Heine, J., “A Nobel Prize for Political Science”, *The Hindu*, November 14, 2009, p. 12.



making. The “invisible hand” of the market as Adam Smith described it, emerged as the collective response of individuals each making decisions in his/ her own self-interest. Ostrom and Williamson challenged this dominant paradigm by claiming that institutions do matter in societal decision-making. Ostrom demonstrated that social organizations matter in decisions about managing natural resources, while Williamson showed that the modern corporation survives because social organization matters in business as well.

In his seminal article “Tragedy of the Commons” published in *Science*, Garrett Hardin<sup>2</sup> claimed that it was inevitable that common property would be degraded in the absence of clearly defined property rights. He used the metaphor of the village commons – the common pasture land which farmers use to graze their cows. Each farmer maximizes his self interest by using the common pasture to graze his cow without incurring any cost. However, as the number of farmers and the number of cows increase, the pasture land will not be able to support the additional cows beyond a certain point. In modern jargon, the pasture land becomes unsustainable. The marginal farmer(s) will not be able to perceive that adding his cow(s) would tip the balance. Soon the pasture will be overgrazed and all the farmers will lose. Hardin described this phenomenon as the “Tragedy of the Commons”. Environmentalists quickly adopted Hardin’s metaphor as the inevitability of environmental degradation due to overuse of the local / global commons. Air and water pollution, soil erosion and land degradation, deforestation and over fishing, loss of biodiversity and even climate change could all be described as tragedies of the commons.

Hardin attributed the tragedy of the commons to the absence of clearly defined property rights. If there had been a public body regulating the use of the commons, that body could ensure that overuse did not occur. Or if the pasture were owned privately, the owner would charge for use and thereby limit the number of users. Thus the two dominant solutions to the “Tragedy of the Commons” are:

- (1) State (public) ownership and regulation
- (2) Private ownership

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2. Cf. Hardin, G., “The Tragedy of the Commons”, *Science*, 162 (1968), pp. 1243-1248.

The State or the market could ensure that overuse and natural resource / environmental degradation did not occur. These two approaches dominated the field of natural resource management until Ostrom proposed a third solution, namely, local management of common property resources based on various empirical studies in different countries. We will briefly discuss the conventional approaches to natural resources / environmental management before discussing the Ostrom approach.

### **State Regulation**

The 1972 U.N. Conference on the Human Environment was a watershed in the globalization of environmental policy. Nearly every country in the world passed legislation to protect, conserve and manage their environment and natural resources. The U.N. Environment Programme (UNEP) assisted developing countries in this respect, and also in managing transboundary and global environmental resources like the oceans and rivers which are shared by many countries. Generally most environmental laws are limited in terms of jurisdiction to their national boundaries. However, many environmental problems are transboundary or global in character and require international agreements. The most well known is the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, since green house gas emissions will affect the wellbeing of all countries.

Many countries found that passing environmental laws was much easier than effective implementation. Lack of information, weak enforcement, as well as limited competence made environmental governance ineffective. The World Bank and other international agencies attempted to improve effectiveness through capacity building programmes. India has a plethora of environmental laws on the books, but very little was achieved in terms of improvement in environmental quality. Capacity building programmes were initiated by the UNDP and the World Bank in the 1990s to remedy the situation. The World Bank published a report "The Cost of Inaction" to highlight the loss to the Indian economy by not taking remedial action in terms of air and water pollution, soil erosion, deforestation etc. Policy makers were warned that *not* implementing environmental programmes also has a cost to society, described as "the cost of inaction". These costs are

called the cost of environmental damage or damage cost by environmental economists. Several studies have been carried out to estimate damage costs in different sectors in different parts of India.

### **Economic Instruments**

There are at least two shortcomings of environmental regulation – inflexibility and ineffectiveness – which are also interrelated. Environmental standards are inherently inflexible because they are dichotomous. When environmental standards are fixed, then a polluter is technically in violation regardless of how far or how close he is to the standard. For example, if a polluter has to meet the waste water standard for biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) of 30 milligram per litre, then he is technically in violation whether the level is 3500 mg / litre or 35 mg / litre and can be prosecuted in either case. Moreover the cost of meeting environmental standards rises exponentially as one gets closer to the standard. This raises the question of whether it is worthwhile to invest in expensive pollution control equipment to achieve certain standards. When the environmental or pollution control agency provides certain leeway to polluters then it may be perceived to be ineffective by the public. There may also be active collusion between the polluter and the environmental agency to relax enforcement of standards to save costs.

Economists have agreed that economic instruments can be used to supplement pure regulation to provide some amount of flexibility. Two types of instruments have been suggested:

- (1) Price instruments such as emission taxes and eco taxes
- (2) Quantity instruments such as tradable permits / quotas

### **Price instruments**

Emission charges can be used in conjunction with standards.<sup>3</sup> If it is not cost effective to install pollution control equipment to achieve the standard, the firm can decide to reduce pollution up to some level which is cost effective, and then pay a tax or charge for the remaining extent of pollution. In some cases such as water pollution, the

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3. Cf. Baumol, W.J. and W.E. Oates, *The Theory of Environmental Policy*, Chapter 11 – Standards and Charges Approach, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

environmental agency can use the revenue from the charges to treat the remaining waste. The only drawback with emission taxes is if they are set too low, the firm will prefer to pay the tax rather than invest in any pollution control equipment. If it is set too high, the firm will find it unaffordable to pay the tax and may have to close down.

Eco taxes are another variant of environmental taxes.<sup>4</sup> The principle here is to discourage the production or use of products that are highly polluting either at the production stage or at the use stage by levying a tax. For example, diesel vehicle can be taxed higher than petrol vehicles, if it is shown that diesel emissions are more polluting than petrol emissions. Similarly chemical pesticides can be taxed on the basis of the toxicity of the pesticide. Eco-friendly substitutes on the other hand could be subsidized. For example, bio pesticides can be subsidized to promote their use.

### Quantity Instruments

Environmental goals can also be achieved by limiting the *aggregate* quantity of emissions either locally (for local pollutants) or globally (for global pollutants like greenhouse gas emissions). The basic principle is that each polluter (or nation) is given a quota. If the polluter wishes to emit more than the quota he can buy part of the allocation given to another polluter (nation). In the case of greenhouse gas emissions, this is known as “carbon trading” in so-called carbon markets. There are also brokers who buy and sell these emission rights on behalf of the polluters (nations). The United States insisted on such tradable permits rather than carbon taxes as a means of achieving reductions in GHGs in the Kyoto protocol. Presumably, a similar mechanism will continue after the next round of negotiations in Copenhagen in December 2009.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of trading is not limited to polluters / emissions, but can also be used for resource management. For example, water users in a river basin can be allotted water rights or quotas. When water is

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4. Cf. Chelliah, R.J. Paul P. Appasamy and U.Sankar. *Ecotaxes on Polluting Inputs and Outputs*, Academic Foundation, 2007.

5. Unfortunately this hope was not realized – *Editor*.



released, they have the option of using the water or selling either part or all of it to another user(s). A farmer may decide not to raise crops in a particular season / year. He can then sell his quota to another farmer or even to a non-agricultural user. However, trading assumes that quantities can be measured fairly accurately! In the case of water, water meters are clearly essential for trading to take place. In India, farmers near urban areas sell their ground water to water tankers who fill up their Lorries then and transport to cities where there is scarcity of public supply.

Another example is fisheries in temperate regions. It is possible to estimate the sustainable yield of commercial species in certain fishing regions of the world. It is possible therefore to allocate fishing rights to the local fishermen who can either use their allocation or trade some or part of the allocation to other fishermen. The aggregate quantity that can be harvested in a particular period is fixed at or below the sustainable yield. The possibility of over fishing is eliminated as long as fishermen strictly abide by their quotas. It is more difficult to implement in tropical areas where there is much greater species diversity and also a large number of small fishermen using traditional craft.

Thus, either price or quantity instruments can be used to supplement regulation in environmental protection or natural resource management. However, Elinor Ostrom and other social scientists postulated a third alternative – local management.<sup>6</sup> The underlying principle is that cooperation or collective action could lead to preferred outcomes. This can be demonstrated using “game theory” and in particular the Prisoners’ Dilemma game which can be used to show that the tragedy of the commons can be averted if there is collective action among the users of the resource. Farmers can decide on the optimum number of cows that can be allowed to graze in the pasture. When the common property resource (CPR) is limited in size, it is possible to enforce certain rules of usage, known as “usufruct” rights. A local organization establishes and enforces these rules, so as to ensure sustainable use. Those violating the rules can be punished.

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6. Cf. Ostrom, E., *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, 1990

There are number of examples of CPRs which have been locally managed in India and elsewhere in the world.

### **(1) Tank irrigation systems**

In southern India, local rulers and governments constructed a large number of irrigation tanks to store the heavy rainfall during the monsoon seasons. The stored water is released through a system of canals and distributaries to the fields of individual farmers at the appropriate time. The entire management of the tank system was done by local organizations. Release of the water, maintenance of the canals, desilting of the tanks etc. was done by particular individuals. Fish could also be raised in the tanks and auctioned.

The water from the tank would be provided only to the people who owned land in the command area of the tank. However, "outsiders" could not benefit from the tank, except in cases where the surplus water from the tank flowed to the next village. In this sense, the tank is like the private property of the village. Property rights are exclusive to a particular village. By imposing various rules of usage, the tank could be used sustainably by the village residents for centuries. However, in recent years when traditional institutions have broken down, degradation of tanks has also taken place.

### **(2) Coastal Fisheries:**

Traditionally, fishermen in the Indian peninsula have demarcated their territory along the coast fairly precisely. Fishermen from a particular village have their own set of rules regarding their fishing rights. They will not permit Outsiders to intrude into their fishing territory. Such intrusions have sometimes led to violence even murder. Self-governing communities of fishermen have been able to sustainably manage their fishing grounds over centuries. However, with the introduction of new technology such as trawlers, there has been a tendency towards over-fishing.

Thus, common property resources have been managed by self-governing communities in a sustainable manner over centuries. The governance system includes detailed rules on usage, sanctions and penalties when rules are violated and some measure of equity in terms of sharing the benefits. The underlying principles of cooperation can

be extended to most areas of natural resource and environmental governance. Stakeholders using the resource must cooperate with each other to ensure that the resource is not degraded or overused. This same approach could be used for air or water quality, forest or fisheries management or climate change. Shared responsibility for the commons (local or global) is the only way that humanity can ensure a better world for tomorrow.

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# **Natural Resources: Perspectives of Primeval Traditions**

**Wati Longchar**

The author is from the state of Nagaland and is the Director of South Asia Theological Research Institute (SATHRI), Bangalore. In this article he draws our attention to the many ways in which tribal people have been affected by the destruction of the environment, and shows how contrary to the modern development paradigm their world-view, way of life and identity are in relationship to land and nature. He also points out the indigenous systems, means and measures to promote environmental well being, land-conservation, etc. bound up with a certain ethical vision sensitive to nature and its groanings. He also points out in this connection the symbolic relationship to land and nature promoted by taboo and totem.

## **Introductory Remarks**

Today the blooming of economic progress, high-tech mechanized life-style is perceived as attainment of higher quality of life. 'Growth' is seen as the only principle for liberation. The growth driven and consumerist economic system and one-sided development pursuits have led to colonization of others and ideological justification for subjugation and exploitation of non-renewable earth's resources in a massive scale. The concepts of 'care for one another', 'just economy' are considered



as non-productivity and the root of all human problems from poverty to sickness to political instability. Any attempt to slow down economic growth is labeled as immorality. Right to have dominion over God's creation is biblical mandate and exploitation is seen as exercising human's creativity bestowed on them in the "Image of God" (Gen 1:27,28). This Enlightenment paradigm of euro-centric modernity rooted on the conquest of nature is the major root cause of today's world crisis. Therefore, the marginalized people are experiencing the worst situation today.

1. The present ecological and the survival crisis of tribal and marginalized groups is a product of modern development paradigm. The whole concept of development is rooted in the uni-linear concept of history and philosophy. It projects the modern western industrial society as the goal to be reached and followed. In this race, the criteria for judging human society are economic growth and the presence of industries. This perception is dangerous for human society and environment.

2. The indigenous and other marginalized communities who live and work close to the soil are the worst affected communities by the unmindful use of natural resources. They have become the victims of developmental activities and many have become environmental prisoners. In addition, they have been uprooted and displaced from the soil-centred life and culture, which eventually lead to an identity crisis. Therefore, the marginalized people's survival issue is an integral part of the crisis in creation-natural resources.

3. Most of the inter-tribal, inter-state and inter-religious rivalries are integral part of the control over the natural resources. The present violence between Hindu-Christian in Orissa is primarily a struggle over the control of land and its resources.

4. The tribal movements like Jharkhand Movement, Maoist movement, Naga movement, Bodo movement, etc. are also integral part of the resource and land crisis. In all these people's movements, we will see the issue of land occupying an important place. People fear that their identity and livelihood will be lost if their homeland is not protected.

5. India, particularly the North East India and Bengal, is going to have the largest environmental prisoners in the next 15 years. It is predicted that about 30% of the costal lands in Bangladesh will be submerged. People will have to move to neighbouring countries. Indigenous people in Assam and Tripura are now reduced to minority. Mass migration is taking place at an alarming scale.

How does the primeval society perceive the natural resources? How do they use and preserve those natural resources for future generations? Primeval traditions are quite rich and diverse. It is not possible to give a comprehensive view of natural resources. Only a few select themes are considered to highlight primeval perspectives on natural resources.

### **The Land, People and Sacred Power**

The land is the mother of all life. Many indigenous societies all over the world maintain a special relationship with the land. Land, for them, is more than just a habitat or a political boundary; it is the basis of their social organization, economic system and cultural identification. The understanding of land is expressed in different ways:

*"The land is the Supreme Being's land"*

*"One cannot become rich by selling land"*

*"Do not be greedy for the land, if you want to live long"*

*"Land is life"*

*"The one who does not have land always cheats others and cannot become a good citizen"*

*"The land cries in the hands of greedy people"*

*"The land never lies; do not lie to the land"*

*"Anyone who takes another's land by giving false witness will not live long"*

*"The land is like a bird, it flies away soon from the hands of greedy people"*

*"You can sell other things, but not land"*

*"You are a stranger without land"*

An Australian aborigine, Galarwuy Yunupingu, maintains the community's relationship to land, thus:

Land gives us value, and our spirituality is in the land. The goodness that is in the land – in the trees, in the water, in the rocks, in the beauty of the landscape and nature itself – enables us to breathe, live and enjoy.<sup>1</sup>

They all expressed the spiritual relationship between the land and people. The land is a very complex spiritual component and occupies a very central place among indigenous peoples.

People's identity is radically related to the land, to mountains, rocks, the entire cosmic universe and everything therein. Contrary to the colonizers' description of the land as 'wilderness' or 'empty space', the land is the temple, their university, their hospital, their market, the vast hall where they congregate and celebrate, their parent, and their life. It is in the land that people worship, heals the sick, educate their children, and feed the people. The loss of land and the destruction of the indigenous peoples environment is an affront to their identities, the loss of their spirituality and their self-determining existence. If the land is lost, the family, clan and village and the tribe's identity too will be lost. A person who is not deeply rooted in the land cannot become a good citizen. He/she is like a stranger without an identity and a home.

Even the Sacred Power is understood in relation to land/space. For example, the Aos and Sang tams of Nagaland call their Supreme Being, *Lijaba*. *Li* means 'land' and *jaba* means 'real'. It means the Supreme Being is 'the real soil' (the real of the real soil). Sometimes people call the Supreme Being *Lizaba*. *Li* means 'soil' and *zaba* means 'enter', meaning 'the one who enters or indwells into the soil'. People believed that the Sacred Power enters into the soil with the seeds and rises again along with the crops (after three moon). God comes out from the soil! (Unlike our transcendental understanding of God who descends from above). Thus, the blooming flower, bearing of fruits and rice

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1 Galarwuy Yunupingu, "Concepts of Land and Spirituality" in *Aboriginal Spirituality – Past, Present, Future*, ed. by Anne Pattel-Gray (Victoria: HarperCollins Religious, 2000 reprint), p. 7.

signifies the presence of the Creator. They see the face of God in creation. The Sacred Power is present in every iota of creation and the whole creation becomes the manifestation of the Creator. In other words, for the indigenous people the land is co-creator with God. The Sacred Power brings blessings through the land, works through the land, and reveals through the land. The Sacred Power reveals as sustainer, nourisher, and giver of life. For many indigenous communities, there is no concept of the Creator without the land; the land and the Creator are inseparably related. The Creator indwells not only in human persons, but also indwells in the soil.

The whole universe is perceived as a religious universe. Rocks and boulders, trees and rivers are not just empty objects, but religious objects; the voices and songs of animals speak of a religious language; the eclipse of the sun and of the moon are not simply a silent phenomenon of nature, it speaks to the community that observes it, often warning of an impending danger and misfortune. It is in this milieu that people experience history and time. Thus, the concept of history and time is inseparably interlinked and rooted in the soil.

Therefore, the land is not a disputable property. People believe that dishonesty in the land boundary is a fatal sin against 'the land'. It was the custom of the people that the final settlement of a land dispute between two individuals or parties is done by eating a lump of soil in the name of the Sacred Power, saying 'If I am wrong let the Sacred Power of the land brings death upon me, even cruel death'. The one who gets sick or dies prematurely is declared as guilty. When people say that the land is truth, it means the land is the mother who sustains all. Thus, it is not proper to seek legal justification in the court of law, because the land does not belong to humans.

Secondly, the land cannot be commercialized. People believe that a person cannot become wealthy by selling the land. People often compare the land with a bird. If one forcibly takes the land from others through unjust means, it will fly away within one or two generations. It is said that the land cries in the hands of greedy people. Moreover, it is believed that the land does not belong to one generation alone. The land is the basis of unity and identity for many generations to come. If



the land is not taken proper care, the indigenous communities cannot exist as community with their distinct identity. Therefore, the present generation does not have the right to commercialize, exploit and abuse it. It is the moral right and duty of every person to take care of, defend, preserve and protect the land and its resources.

Thirdly, it is to be shared by all. The land custodians must ensure that everybody get a plot of land for cultivation. A person is responsible to use the land in such a way that all villagers are benefited. It is the sustaining power and mother of all.

### **The Method of Land Conservation**

Since the land is the foundation of all life, the indigenous people took utmost care. The land was protected through observance of ceremonies, rituals and 'Earth's Day' or 'Mother Earth's Day'. For example, the Earth's Day is observed up to 3 to 6 days by many communities. The earth was given complete rest and treated with much respect.

All the indigenous communities, whether in Asia, Africa, North America or South America, perceive the whole cosmos as one integrated and interlinked experience. The earth is always brought to the centre of their day-to-day life. For example, in some societies gifting/offering a traditional shawl is the greatest honor to be offered to a guest. It was never given directly to a person to person, but the giver first places it on the ground and the receiver takes it from the ground. Meaning, it comes from the soil and you take it from the soil. When a person is offered a drink, a few drops are first dropped on the ground, giving honor to the ground. It connects the person with the mystery of the earth. The space always brings in between the persons. This is called spiritual connection to space. The space is always acknowledged in their religious and ethical life. These values are/were not mere abstract concepts, but were part of people's life and existence. This provides a vision of life not based on the conquest of nature, people and their culture, but rooted on harmonious relationship with nature, preservation and protection of people and their culture. We need to affirm progress, development and liberation as important components for human life, but without neglecting the spiritual connection to earth's

family. One of the major roots of today's world crises is the negligence of the spiritual connection with space/earth/creation for human liberation. Rejection of this spiritual connection with the earth's family in development activities will be a serious mistake for the future survival of the world.

Another component that protects natural resources is the practice of rest. The *Jhum* cultivation, a practice of shifting cultivation in forest-lands is also one concrete example of the ethics of conservation. The cultivators make a 7-10 year cycle in *jhum* cultivation. The earlier cultivated land regains, and recaptures or conserves the energy for a good cultivation when, under this system, cultivation comes back in 7 to 10 years. The farmer, even in the cultivation of rice and other grains, rotates various kinds of seeds and grains, and conserves the fertility of the land. In fact, some patches of land are not cultivated and left fallow even for three to five years continuously. This demonstrates the ethics of conservation practised by the indigenous people. In the process, the forest wealth is conserved by using it only seasonally.<sup>2</sup>

For many indigenous communities rice cultivation is the hallmark of their activities. The advice of "cutting the basket-string" is very significant for conservation of earth's resources. Without a string, it is not possible to carry the rice grain in basket. The cutting of the string implies that one should have a limit. An excessive accumulation of wealth is not approved by God as well as by community. In modern understanding 'rich' means the one who accumulates 'wealth', but in indigenous understanding, the one who gives everything for the sake of others is called 'rich'. In other words, one's richness is measured not by how much one accumulates, but by how much a person shares with the members of the community. That is why one will see the observance of 'feast of merit' among many indigenous communities.

The land ownership system protected the land and its resources. In indigenous societies, each tribe has a well-defined territory. Within the tribal territory, every village has a well-demarcated territory. Again,

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2 Nirmal Minz, "Tribal Perspectives on Ecology" in *The Tribal Worldview and Ecology*, Tribal Study Series No. 2, eds. Wati Longchar & Yangkahao Vashum (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 1998), pp. 5-6.

the village territory is further divided into two holdings: a) Common village land – some plots are specifically kept for public institutions like *Morung*<sup>3</sup>, the place of worship, grave yard and so on. It is the responsibility of the whole villagers to protect these common properties. b) Clan's land – Each clan has a land earmarked for the construction of houses, cultivation lands and woodlands within the village territory. The eldest person is the custodian of the clan's land. The clan members are free to cultivate, but the primary responsibility of each clan is to preserve and protect their demarcated land from exploitation.<sup>4</sup>

### The Ethics of Conservation – Taboo and Totem

Since the primeval societies depend completely on nature for their sustenance – economic and medicinal needs, they maintain a close balance between people and ecological needs in such a way that both are protected and preserved. Their culture, beliefs and practices were geared to maintaining a balance between human and ecological needs. Such a balance was essential to protect nature from the danger of over-exploitation. This balance was maintained through the practice of taboo and totem. These controls were legitimized by giving a religious basis through myths.

**Taboo**<sup>5</sup> - It simply means 'prohibition' or forbidden activity, something that is not permitted, something stands against social approval and is disallowed by norms of behaviour. The practice of

3 Dormitory for boys and girls.

4 For detail, see Wati Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity* (Jorhat: Eastern Theological College, 1995), pp. 64-73.

5 This word 'taboo' comes from the Polynesian dialect introduced into English language by Captain Cook in 1777. According to Henry Presler, taboo or taboos are those "caution established to guard against supernaturally dangerous things like plants, animals or persons especially those possess *mana*. Taboo extends to action as well. Any act that violates the community norm brings the supernatural penalty. Therefore, the taboo object is not to be seen or violated, touched, heard, smelt and tested. If violated, the person or community will automatically lead to supernatural anger or penalty. A person could become infected with the impersonal supernatural power by touching a plant, animal or any object containing *mana*. It is believed that such power is transmissible. Thus the infected person or object is as dangerous as the original taboo object. However, taboo can also be avoided by ritual performance.

taboo covers the whole activity of the indigenous society. It applies between sex, different age groups, household, different clan members and village-wise, and even according to change of seasons. A taboo is observed with awareness that it affects the whole community. When the observance of taboo is neglected, it is not only the human community who suffers but even the animals and plants are affected. Taboos are, therefore, the signs that the whole world is interrelated and interconnected.

The observance of taboo is thus applied to all beings regardless of whether they are human or animal. When it comes to agriculture, taboo is observed to ensure good food crops and bounteous harvests. The land is allowed to rejuvenate its fertility through the observance of rituals and taboos. In addition, it is forbidden to cut certain trees because they are considered sacred. Trees like the banyan, peepul, oak, etc. are protected throughout the villages. Cutting these trees is considered to be highly taboo by the people.

In the primeval religious system, taboo is observed in every religious act. It is a sacred holiday from work, and a day of rest and prayer. Taboo takes place in different duration and intensity. Some are for one day, others for a few days, a week or more. While some taboo days are observed by the whole village, some are observed by the clan and family only. While observing taboo, people do not talk to strangers. The daily routine work comes to a standstill, nothing goes in or out of the house, no animals or birds are allowed to be killed, and sexual contact is to be avoided. Everything is left to rest completely. It is a period of rest for the land, family and community. It is a period meant for the revitalization of the earth bringing holistic benefit to the community. Taboo also provides opportunities for people to be more charitable to themselves and others, to the animals and the plants around them and to their rice fields.

Taboo period is also a time of reflection and contemplation. Free from hard work and engagement, people can now reflect on their approach to agriculture, animals, people and Sacred Power. Without taboo with its ample rest, the indigenous people may not have been



able to develop a healthy God-world-human relationship. Taboo, therefore, enriches the whole land and community along with the flora and fauna. Such an observance is essential to protect nature from exploitation. In other words, this prudent way of using food allows one group or sex to utilize the resources while others were restricted from doing so. This culture of restraint brings harmony with nature.

**Totem<sup>6</sup>** - The totem is another practice which ensures balance and harmony in society as well as with environment. The indigenous people restricted certain animals and plants from being exploited by maintaining a totemic relation with natural objects. A totem is usually "a species of an animal or of a plant or insect or bird and very rarely a class of inanimate objects, very closely related to a group in that the group of people is believed to descend from the animal or any of the species."<sup>7</sup> Some of the common totem animals are tiger, tortoise, cobra, monkey, jackal, deer, dog, buffalo, cock, peacock, owl, fish, and so on, and the plants totem are like rice, cereal, cucumber and mushroom. A common phenomenon of totem belief is that the clan which traces its origin to such a totem sometimes name after the totem and attribute as supernatural power. It gives a form of social and religious practice.

The indigenous communities maintain a very strong symbiotic relationship with the environment because of their totemic roots. The surroundings are personified by attributing personality. Each clan considered it an obligation to protect their totem. Because of this totemic relationship and the myths related to animals and plants, the indigenous communities revere them greatly. In that way, the natural resources were protected and preserved from being over-exploited.

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- 6 The word 'totem' comes from the language of the Ojibway Indian tribe of North American simply mean 'brother-sister kin'. Emile Durkheim in his book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, described different aspects of totem manifestations and arrived at a conclusion that totemism is an elementary form of religious life. He sees this as a social and religious institution through which divisions of tribe are believed to be systematically and permanently associated with species of animals, plants and inanimate objects.
- 7 J.H. Thumra, "The Primal Religious Tradition", *Religious Traditions of India*, eds. By P.S. Daniel, *et.al.* (Kottayam: ITL, 1988), p. 51.

## Conclusion

I would like to conclude this presentation by summarizing the observations made by Nirmal Minz on tribal people's view of ecology<sup>8</sup>:

1. The earth, the environment, natural resources and eco-system have been misunderstood as a machine that humans could maneuver as they liked. The mindless destruction of earth's resources, and marginalization and subjugation of the marginalized people, like tribals, through war, cultural genocide, alienation, denial and suppression are deeply rooted in such view of life. This wrong notion must be challenged and corrected.

2. Industries and mining of natural resources are necessary but there has to be a limit. Balance in industry and mining is necessary if humans are to live on this earth.

3. Rejection of this spiritual connection with earth's family in development activities will be a serious mistake for the future survival of the world. Unless we rediscover our spiritual connection with the earth's family, it is not possible to talk about a community where all citizens are treated justly. It is like attempting to liberate oneself after killing one's mother. Progress is possible only in relation to protection of the land and its resources.

4. Promote indigenous people's way of life, economic practices and spiritual connection to land, and protect their control of and access to their resources and environment. This will prevent large scale eviction from their ancestral lands, economic dislocation, breakdown of traditional values, and environmental degradation.

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8 See Nirmal Minz, "Tribal Perspective on Ecology" *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

# The TINAI Way

Nirmal Selvamony

The author, professor of Language Study at the Central University of Tamilnadu, Thiruvavur, takes up the study of Tinai among the Tamils whose classification of people was not according to caste or nation, but according to their land and habitat – coastal land, mountain ranges, desert etc. Each of these bioregions developed cultures specific to the experience of the flora and fauna surrounding them, and each one had its own gods and goddesses that reflected the nature of the bioregion. This was disrupted by the advent of state-formation and introduction of religious traditions like Saivism and Vaishnavism. With these developments an ecology-centered egalitarian society “changed to a hierarchic one with the sacred at the top, the humans in the middle and nature at the bottom”. The article is an invitation to recover our ecological heritage which is primordial and unifying and to relativize institutions like nation, state, religion, and practices like development all of which could cause ecological destruction and crisis.

*Tinai* is a type of society that is intrinsically bound to a specific geographical region. The ancient Tamils had divided the entire earth's surface into four major geographical regions—the scrubland, the mountain, the riverine plains, and the seacoast. To these they added the arid region, the fifth category, as a transient one because the arid region is not a permanent land type; it is possible only when a patch of either the scrubland or the mountain is degraded by some means such as drought, fire or overgrazing. Each of these land regions was a social

order with its distinct natural and cultural features. If tree, bird, animal are natural features, economy, governance, worship, music, and communication are cultural ones.

### Society and Bioregions

From a sociological perspective, a society need not be attached to a particular part of the earth. Such societies as the family, church and corporation are not earth-bound but anchored in a world of relationships. At times we so speak of earth-bound society also in sociology, say for example, a country or a nation-state, which has distinct geographical territory.

There are a few types of society which bear close resemblance to *tinai*, biome, bioregion, and *oikos*. Let us look at each one of these briefly. A biome is a natural community with its distinct flora and fauna. Modern botanists have divided the entire earth's surface into a few biomes though they are not agreed on the specific number of biomes. According to one biologist, there are five: Tundra and high mountains, Forests, Grasslands, Deserts and Aquatic regions.<sup>1</sup>

The second equivalent is bioregion which is a "life-place" with natural rather than cultural boundaries. The inhabitants of a bioregion can distinguish one bioregion from another by their close association with the distinctive floral, faunal and other natural features of their bioregion.

The third equivalent is *oikos*, the ancient Greek concept which literally means "household" or "homestead". To the ancient Greeks, the *oikos* or household did not mean just the humans and the house they lived in, but the vegetation around the house, animals supported by the vegetation and the spirit beings that dwelt therein. The ancient Greeks practised ancestral worship and believed that the spirits of their ancestors resided in the precincts of the house and required regular propitiation and worship.

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1. Cf. Selvamony, Nirmal. "An Alternative Social Order." *Value Education Today: Explorations in Social Ethics*. Ed. J.T.K. Daniel and Nirmal Selvamony. Madras: Madras Christian College and New Delhi: All-India Association for Christian Higher Education, 1990, p. 216; Cf. also Peoples, James and Garrick Bailey, ed. *Humanity: An Introduction To Cultural Anthropology*. 8<sup>th</sup> Edition. West/Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont, 2008.



However, we could identify some differences between each of these and *tinai*. While bioregion, *oikos* and *tinai* include humans, biome does not. Among the human-inclusive categories, namely, bioregion, *oikos* and *tinai*, only *tinai* specifies the human communities associated with a given region. In biome and *tinai* the flora and fauna associated with a land area are predictable whereas in the bioregion and *oikos* they are not.

### Number of *Tinai*

The earliest mention of the concept of *tinai* is found in the oldest extant Tamil text, namely, *Tolkaappiyam*<sup>2</sup>, dateable, according to Ilakkuvanaar, to 700 B.C.<sup>3</sup> One of the first theoretical problems one faces while dealing with *tinai* is the question of number of *tinaikal*. Even if we go by *Tolkaappiyam*, we will have to reckon with this question, “How many *tinaikal* does this text speak of?” Depending on our criterion of reckoning, the total number may vary from four, five, seven to even fourteen. If the unchangeable natural land basis is our criterion, there will be only four *tinaikal* meeting that criterion: the scrub, mountainous, riverine and coastal regions. The term “*naanilam*” sometimes denotes four *tinaikal* each based on a distinct land region: *mullai* (scrub), *kurinci* (mountain), *marutam* (riverine plains) and *neytal* (sea coast). Early Tamils spoke only of *naanilam*, not *naaltinai*. The former term may connote the four *tinaikal* at times by way of semantic extension. But semantic distinction should not be compromised for the sake of semantic extension. The arid tracts will not be included in this set because though it is based on a natural land region, the region is not an unchangeable one.

The phrase, “*anpin aintinai*” shows that there are five *tinaikal*. These include the set of four discussed above and also the one based on the arid tracts. The term *anpin aintinai* shows that the criterion for these five is love. These are the five *akam* domains wherein love is the basis of all the actions of the protagonists. This is not true of

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2. Cf. Tolkaappiyar, *Tolkaappiyam* (Tamil), ed. T.S. Balasundaram Pillai, Chennai: Tirunelveli, South India Saiva Siddhanta Publishing Works Limited, 1943.
  3. Ilakkuvanaar, “Introduction”, *Tholkappiyam in English with Critical Studies*, Madurai: Kural Neri Publishing House, 1963, p. 11.

either *kaikkilai* or *peruntinai*. These latter are *tinaikal* nevertheless but they are not based on love as such. What brings the two protagonists together is not love but passion. In *kaikkilai* it is unrequited passion whereas in *peruntinai* it is excessive passion. Love is a kind of *kilai* or relationship which ought to be complementary and mutual. When this relationship is “small” (*kai*), it cannot be love. Love is also “conduct” (*tinai*), but not transgressive like *peruntinai*. When it is “too much” (*peru-*), it ceases to be conduct of love. The terms “*kaikkilai*” and “*peruntinai*” clearly show that *tinai* is not to be equated with land types. If we add up the two *tinaikal*, *kaikkilai* and *peruntinai* with the five that are land-oriented, we have seven *tinaikal* in all.

Each *tinai* has an *akam* aspect as well as a *puram* aspect.

*Kaikkilai* – *Paadaan*

*Mullai* – *Vanci*

*Kurinci* – *Vetci*

*Paalai* – *Vaakai*

*Marutam* – *Uzhinai*

*Neytal* – *Tumpai*

*Peruntinai* – *Kaanci*

When each of these is counted as a separate *tinai*, we have fourteen altogether. Though post-*Tolkaappiyam* writers have added more *tinaikal*, the land-based *tinaikal* continue to remain the normative ones.

### The Structure of *Tinai*

Having considered the question of the number of *tinaikal*, we need to understand their structure. The three major constituents of the structure of *tinai* are *mutal*, *karu* and *uri*, which can be roughly translated as “the primary”, “the generative elements” and “the appropriate” (action). Of these, *mutal* (the base, primary) is land-time complex as well as the axiological basis as evident is the phrase, “*anpin aintinai*” (five *tinaikal* based on love). Even as land-time complex is *mutal*, love is the common ground for *mummutal porul*, the three ultimate categories, *aram* (the ethical), *porul* (wealth) and *inipam*

(happiness). *Karu* (literally, embryo) includes all generative elements, both natural and cultural. If tree, bird and animal are the natural features, deity, occupation and music are the cultural. *Uri* (literally, the appropriate) refers to the actions appropriate to each *tinai*: staying, union, sulking, pining and separation.

Each of the five land-based *tinaikal* has its own appropriate *mutal*, *karu* and *uri* constituents. Since “*uri*” presupposes the existence of human inhabitants (*tinaippeyar*) in each *tinai*, we could associate a given *tinai* with its corresponding *tinaippeyar* - shepherds with the scrub jungle, the mountain dwellers with the mountains, the hunters with the arid tracts, the ploughman with the riverine and the fishing folk with the sea coast, to name only the typical human community of each region.

The structure of *tinai* could be better understood in the light of the structure of *oikos*. The *oikos* has basically three members, human, nature and the sacred, which already always stand in an inexorable relation to each other. In other words, the existence of anyone of the three members presupposes the existence of the other two. This means that every human is born into an *oikos* and even at birth involved in a web of relationship with Nature and the sacred.

The constituents of *tinai* could be regrouped as humans, nature and the sacred if we subsume the cultural elements of *karu* such as occupation, and music under, “humans”. When we need to study the humans particularly in relation to the other constituents of the society, we have to take human as a separate category. Since the triadic structure of *tinai* with its *mutal*, *karu* and *uri* does not put the human as a separate category, the structural categories of the *oikos*, namely, humans, nature and the sacred, are helpful for theoretical purposes. This does not undermine *tinai* structure in any way nor uphold *oikos* as a concept better than *tinai* or any such thing. In fact, *tinai* turns out to be the least anthropocentric concept compared to *oikos* with respect to its avoidance of postulating the human as one of the triadic structural constituents.

### Eco-centred Integrative Society

The primordial relation among the three members of the *oikos* has

not been the same throughout since the dawn of humans on this planet. It has changed resulting in wholly new kinds of social order. Of the three major types of society discussed by western cultural anthropologists, namely, the hunter-gatherer, the agricultural and the industrial, the hunter-gatherer has lasted the longest time, from about 100, 000 years ago to 10, 000 BC (say about 97, 000 years), whereas the agricultural from 10, 000 BC to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (about 10, 800 years), and the last type, the Industrial from 1800 to the present (about 200 years).

Undoubtedly, the foraging society has been the most stable and the longest survivor. Considering the fact that this type has survived till today, it is arguable that it is the most stable and sustainable type than the other two. Therefore, the foraging type could be regarded as the maximally integrative whereas the agricultural as the minimally integrative and the industrial the most disintegrative.

Even in the foraging societies innovations were made which led to changes within the social institutions. For example, the newly discovered food items and medicinal properties of some herbs and other organic matter brought about changes within the social practice of health. Similarly, a shift from a plain musical bow to one with a resonator attached to one end of the bow introduced the device of the resonator and this brought about a significant change in the way the musical sound was perceived by early humans. Though this primitive society introduced some of the basic social needs such as contact with the sacred and wild nature, tools made of stone, wood and bone, toys, music, dance, painting and statuettes, the changes they brought about did not disrupt the society as a whole. Instead, the changes helped improve the interrelation with other humans, nature and the sacred. In short, the endogenous changes in social practices were ultimately conservational in effect rather than disintegrative. Take for example, the grass skirt. The making of this garment was ultimately a kind of conservational human effort rather than a disintegrative one. This primitive garment technology was indigenous in that it was not an article of import. It was produced by a society for its own use with the help of a kind of technology today known as appropriate technology using the raw materials available in the particular place where it was produced.



The indigenous garment technology establishes a tradition that is passed on from one generation to another. Since it was crafted to specific social needs, surplus production was not desirable at all. The scale of production was small. This meant that the producer had control over production and use also on the economy involved therein. All this ultimately corresponded with the value system that supported the social practice.

In fact, we could lay down the following as the principles underlying the integrative society: indigenouness, controlled diversity, traditionality, smallness of scale, and value orientation. People of this society could follow such principles and foster the necessary values to empower those principles because they enjoyed a kind of relation to Nature and the sacred that could be described as "kinship relation". The people who produced the grass skirt and looked upon the Laurel tree as a kin of theirs belong to the integrative type of society known as *tinai*.

### **State Formation and End of *Tinai***

*Tinai* society was disrupted by the state formation efforts of the tribal chieftains. When these rulers annexed large areas of land in what is today called Tamil Nadu, they formed the kingdoms (*naatukal*) of ceerar, coozhar, and paantiyar. By clearing vast tracts of forest land, the monarchs created the capitals and settlements along the river banks. These are the earliest major developmental efforts in the Tamil land. The role of Brahmin settlement in these monarchies and the adoption of the caste social order in lieu of the earlier *tinai* social order are of crucial importance for Tamil historiography. These are the crucial factors of social change during this period.

In the new state society tribal animism was overshadowed by the religious systems like Saivism and Vaishnavism with their scriptural and priestly institutional components. How exactly these religious systems evolved and ousted animism is a matter that requires detailed analysis which will not be attempted here. The pervasive sacred was now confined to a specific location and housed in a structural temple. The forest land was converted into agricultural fields to produce food necessary to support the state institutions like the temple, the military and other royal grants and settlements. Intense irrigated agriculture

undermined not only regional diversity, but also cultural diversity. Food pattern changed with rice replacing a variety of millets and tubers and cereals. The fivefold regional map shrunk to a twofold one with the wetland and dry land, *naatu* and *kaatu*. If *naatu* was inhabitable, auspicious space, *kaatu* was just the opposite. The latter was home to wild animals, thieves and antisocial elements.

The diversely egalitarian and integrative *tinai* society changed to a hierarchic one with the sacred at the top, the humans in the middle and nature at the bottom. Conversion of forest land into agricultural fields and the creation of new human settlements were priorities on the agenda of state formation in the period of Pallavar. For this reason, these kings earned the title of *kaatuvetti* (meaning, clearer of forest). A typical representation of this state-sponsored activity is found in the sculptural panel usually called Mahishamardani. This panel from Maamallapuram, an important port of Pallavar, depicts a battle between the army of Korravai, the deity of the arid tracts, and the army of the buffalo chieftain. While the *puranic* account of this battle portrays the buffalo chieftain as a demon challenging the goddess, a *tinai* reading will help us see the buffalo chieftain as the leader of *marutam* the riverine plains. The chieftain of *marutam* is represented here by a buffalo since the latter is the characteristic animal of this region of cows and bulls. Those days it was buffalo which aided agricultural activities. Again, if the Aryan pastoralists favoured the cow and attributed ritual significance to it, the buffalo was associated with the indigenous aboriginal people. Added to its local associations, was its dark colour or *varna*. No wonder why the animal was demonized in the writings in Sanskrit, the language that enjoyed state patronage much more than any first language of the subjects under state rule. The artistic representation may be based on the actual encounter between the immigrant and alien ruler who invoked the aid of the goddess in his attempt to subdue the local indigenous chieftain of *marutam*. The colonizing alien rulers could have vanquished several *marutam* chieftains and annexed their land for creation of new ones. The aliens could have identified themselves more easily with *paalai*, which technically is an in-between region without a stable identity of its own.

Though agricultural conversion began even in the pre-Christian era in the Tamil-speaking areas, it has been going on throughout even in the Industrial age.

### **Advent of Industrial Society and Eco-crisis**

The hierarchic social order of the state society was disrupted when the British introduced Industrial Revolution in India. Along with mega technology came industrial capitalism, market economy, mass production, democracy, rationalism, western science. In other words, earlier forms of social institutions underwent major changes resulting in the disintegration of the hierarchic *oikos*. Under the impact of rationalism and western science, the belief in the sacred was challenged. Democracy and the philosophical anthropology upon which it was based redefined human identity as consisting mainly in the psychosomatic complex rather than in the communitarian nature of the human. Democracy, capitalism, and the nuclear family were based on this newly emerging Cartesian idea of the human and encouraged individualism. This isolated humans not only from the sacred and nature but from their own community. Humans were isolated from one another in a solipsistic manner.

Agricultural development in the hierarchic *oikos* and Industrial capitalist development in the anarchic *oikos* have been the chief engines of social change. These types of development have left us with a kind of society that is totally unlike *tinai*. In fact, development has killed *tinai*. Jo Woodman, a researcher with Survival International, London, has written a piece in *The Hindu* on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January 2008, which is captioned, "Progress Can Kill". Woodman is writing about the impact of development on the tribal people. "All tribal peoples have a very special relationship to land; it is the source of their identity, society, culture and religion. Remove them from it, and quite literally, you destroy the world as they know it." Usually, the tribal people are removed from their land for purposes of development; to enable them to have access to schools, clinics, and lead more developed lives, but these benefits are mere illusions. In reality, they have been exposed to many diseases, including HIV/AIDS, and to problems including prostitution, and alcoholism. All of these were unknown when they lived on their own land.

Development in the anarchic society has killed not only *tinai* life, but taken its toll on the mainstream society also. It has precipitated nothing less than a global crisis which in fact is an ecological one. The kind of global climate change we see today is an inconvenient truth. The next World War may be for water! Oxygen may become a precious commodity for speculation and hoarding by powerful monopolies. Poverty in most cases is due to landlessness. When basic necessities are scarce or unavailable, physical and mental health is threatened and morals jeopardized. The bold step towards a resolution of the present crisis will be restoring *tinai* social order. Whether the restoration of this order is feasible or not is a matter of thorough social planning and a resolute political will. If there is political will, there surely is a way, the *Tinai* Way.

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## Deconstructing Gender for Rediscovering 'Home'

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The author is a research scholar, Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras. In this article gender is taken as a key to analyze an ideological framework underlying the ecological question. It examines the gendered constructions of ecology by laying bare the problematic of the deeply ingrained association between woman and the earth in a culture informed by patriarchy. According to the author, deconstructing the 'feminization' of nature and naturalization of 'feminine' is imperative in view of respecting nature's subjectivity and autonomy and its connectedness with humans. A partnership ethic among humans and with nature sets the ground for making the *oikos* a 'home'.

"Domination is one of our century's most fruitful concepts for understanding human-human and human-nature relationships"

Carolyn Merchant

*Ecology-Key Concepts in Critical Theory*

"And let the daughters of uneducated women dance...and let them sing, 'We have done with war! We have done with tyranny!' And their mothers will laugh from their graves, 'It was for this that we suffered obloquy and contempt! Light up the windows of the new house, daughters! Let them blaze!'"

Virginia Woolf  
*Three Guineas*

The earth is our 'home' - a dwelling place for humans and all forms of life. Perhaps, we humans are beginning to appreciate the significance of this 'home' now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when its very foundations are being shaken by greenhouse gas emissions, global warming, rising sea levels, the alarming pollution of air, water and other essentials. But, envisaging the earth as a home solely in view of the integrity of human life, in the context of the present ecological crisis threatening life on this planet, betrays an anthropocentric and utilitarian stance. My reflection on ecology premised on the notion of the earth as a 'home' is not from an anthropocentric standpoint, but from its etymological position as it could help evolve a new relationality with the cosmos.

The expression 'ecology' is derived from Greek term *oikos* meaning "house". We know that what makes a house home is not its structure but the relationships of those who live in it. Ecology, explained as 'the complex web of interrelationships between organisms and the environment'<sup>1</sup> makes sense from this point of view. The interrelationship between humans, the other forms of life, and the earth that sustains this life is governed by different anthropocentric and anthropomorphic ideologies. The pressing need of the hour is to examine critically the underlying features of these ideologies so that we identify the problem at its root. Along with the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions at the global level, certain attitudinal changes at the level of personal and collective thinking could help bring about a positive change in the complex web of interrelations between organisms and the environment.

In this paper, I take gender as a key to analyze an ideology underlying the ecological question. I will first examine the gendered constructions of ecology, and the problematic of the deeply ingrained association between woman and the earth in a culture informed by patriarchy. Deconstructing such associations sets the ground for reconstructing a worldview which is imperative for rediscovering the 'home'.

### **The 'feminization' of nature and naturalization of the 'feminine'**

An uncritical association of female body and sexuality with nature

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1 Cf. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical feminism*, Great Britain: The Women Press Unlimited, 1979, p.9.

and the exaltation of nature in maternal imagery have characterized the dominant discourse over the years. These associations have been celebrated in art, poetry and in creation myths across the cultures. The portrayal of nature as a naked passive nymph in Lucas Cranach's 'The Nymph of Spring' and Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus and Primavera' showing the virgin in conjunction with the earth-mother covered with a crown and wreath of flowers, give evidence to this. In the Indian context, The Vedic hymn 'Prayer to the Earth' is a telling example of the woman-nature association.<sup>2</sup>

The problematic of woman-nature linkage comes to the fore in the widespread and deep-rooted metaphor of the seed and the earth to signify conjugal relationships, a metaphor familiar in the Indian context. The seed symbolizes the father's contribution and the field represents the mother. Human reproduction has been conceived in terms of male seed germinating in the female field, a cleverly devised patriarchal symbolism to justify patriarchal lineage. Woman and field are only nurturers while crop-child, and woman's body symbolized as the field, are all under the custody of the father. Leela Dube argues that while patriarchy ties down women to the 'supreme duty' of motherhood, the symbolism is utilized by the patriarchal culture to create and sustain an ideology in which strategic resources of both types, material and human remain in the hands of men.<sup>3</sup>

Deconstructing the 'naturalization' of the female body as primarily procreative, has been a daunting task that confronted the second wave feminist discourse. The feminist slogan '*biology is not our destiny*' signaled to the emerging woman who demanded the recognition of her full humanity and personhood. In a similar manner, deconstructing the 'feminization' of nature is critical in view of checking the uncontrolled exploitation of nature for satisfying human greed.

### **The destructive impasse of hierarchical dualism: the culture-nature divide**

A critical enquiry into the ideology of the woman-nature is essential

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2 Hymn *Bhoomi Sukta*, versus 6, 12, and 59 in *Atharva Veda* XII,1

3 Cf. Leela Dube, "Seed and Earth: The Symbolism of Biological Reproduction and Sexual Relations in Production" in *Anthropological Explorations in Gender: Intersecting Fields*, New Delhi: Sage Publications 2000, pp.119-153.

in order to deconstruct it. Within a patriarchal framework, difference is explained in terms of hierarchical and dualistic thinking pattern. In this context, *culture* is taken as an expression of civilization, education, refinement and is seen above and against *nature* which is considered to be wild, untamed, uncouth, crude and the like. The culture/ nature dichotomy marked by superiority and inferiority is reflected also in other systems of dualism such as mind/body, active/passive transcendence/immanence, spirit/flesh and the like. As Susan Griffin argues, the culture-nature divide is based on an epistemological paradigm informed by Greek dualism which considers that nature, woman and body are material, irrational, passive, dependent and immanent as opposed to culture, man and spirit which are immaterial, rational, active, independent and transcendent.<sup>4</sup> The undercurrents of the culture-nature divide also find expression in the relationship between the colonialist and the colonized as well as that of the capitalist and the proletarian in the industrial societies.<sup>5</sup>

Hierarchical-dualism that marks the patriarchal ideology got translated into life and growth processes through the notion of gender. As an analytical term, 'gender' expresses 'socio-cultural definitions of man and woman, the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles'<sup>6</sup> Gender is inscribed on women and men through individual socialization and public discourses. While men are assigned the 'masculine' standards of self-assertion, independence, power, and control, women are called to fulfill their true 'feminine' character and destiny through self-sacrificing service and loving self-effacement. Gender became the marker of human geography into the domestic and public space, the feminine identified with the domestic space and the associated caring, nurturing roles and the masculine occupying the public space with economic agency, leadership and

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4 Cf. Susan Griffin, *Made from this Earth*, London 1982, p.163 as cited in Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis*, p.47.

5 Cf. Carol P. Mac Cormac and Marilyn Strathern (eds), *Nature, Culture and Gender*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1980, pp 1-24.

6 Kamla Bhasin, *Understanding Gender*, New Delhi: Kali for Women 2005, p.1.



decision making roles. Women's bodies came to be defined as 'creative and productive like nature',<sup>7</sup> and with the internalization of gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, the notion that 'men are to culture as women are to nature'<sup>8</sup> came to be accepted as a universal certainty.

Seen from this angle, the *Purusha/Prakriti* representation of the masculine and feminine principle in the Indian cosmology is grave as *Purusha* is taken to be the active primordial spirit and *Prakriti*, becomes the passive matter. Analysts also point out that this representation is inscribed by caste as 'the Sanskrit texts from which such a worldview is drawn represent the views of rich high caste men'.<sup>9</sup> This dualistic thinking pattern also makes women and nature highly vulnerable to ruthless exploitation as both can be possessed, used and abused and the 'Master' would think that he is only exercising ownership rights.

### **Ecofeminism: A contested attempt for a breakthrough**

The notion of Ecofeminism was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne, a French feminist in her 1974 work *Le Feminisme ou la mort*. Her contention in introducing the concept *eco-feminisme* was that the fate of the human species and the planet is at stake, and that no male led "revolution" will counteract the horrors of overpopulation and destruction of natural resources.<sup>10</sup> Many ecofeminists see important connections between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the domination and oppression of women, and they trace this to a shared history of oppression by the patriarchal culture.<sup>11</sup> They argue that because the domination of women and the domination

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7 Cf. Cecile Jackson, "Environmentalisms and Gender Interests in the Third World" in *Development and Change*, Vol.24 (1993) 649-677, here 659.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Rao B., 'Dominant Constructions of omen and Nature in Social Science Literature' in *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, Pamphlet 2, New York: Guilford 1991, p.19, cited by Cecile Jackson, "Environmentalisms and Gender Interests in the Third World", p.662.

10 Cf. Françoise d'Eaubonne, *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*, Paris: Pierre Horay 1974, cited by Mary Daly in *Gyn/Ecology*, p.9.

11 Mary Mellor, *Feminism & Ecology*, New York University Press, 1997, p.1

of nature have occurred together, women have a particular stake in ending the domination of nature, 'in healing the alienated human and non-human nature'.<sup>12</sup>

Ecofeminists see an urgency for uprooting the capitalist patriarchal world system which is built upon and maintained through the colonization of women, of foreign peoples, their land and of nature. They argue that women's expertise in ecological knowledge, which is oriented to the social benefits and sustenance needs is not recognized by the capitalist reductionist paradigm, because it fails to perceive the interconnectedness of nature, or the connection of women's lives, work and knowledge with the creation of wealth."<sup>13</sup> Ecofeminism connects patterns of male domination of women with those in which science and technology are bound to a conception of absolute mastery over matter on the grounds that nature in our distanced masculine scientific culture has been made 'other', something essentially different from the dominant male who has an unlimited right to exploit "mother" earth.<sup>14</sup>

The ecofeminist association of women and nature also lays stress on women as the primary protectors of the environment and protesters against environmental destruction. The *Chipko* Movement (Chipko means to cling to) is taken as an illustration to this effect where women belonging to the backward classes of the Himalayan region tried to protect the trees from the axe of the deforesters by clinging to them even at the risk of their own lives. The ecofeminist argument is that wherever women acted against ecological destruction or/and the threat of atomic annihilation, they immediately become aware of the connection between patriarchal violence against themselves,

- 12 Ynestra King, 'The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology' in Judith Plant (ed), *Healing the Wounds*, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers 1989, pp18-28, here p.18. as cited by Bina Agarwal "The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India" in Nalini Vishvanathan (ed), *The Women, Gender and Development Reader*, New Delhi: Zubaan 1997, p.68.
- 13 Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women Ecology and Development*, New Delhi: Kali for Women 1988, p.24
- 14 Cf. Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis*, p.42.

other people and nature and in defying patriarchy they become loyal to future generations and to life and this planet itself.<sup>15</sup>

Cultural ecofeminists question the patriarchal religious framework which is demoralizing for its hierarchical dualism and the exclusion of both women and nature from the mediation and representation of the divine. Spiritual/cultural ecofeminists attempt to 'revive' a woman-focused or feminist religiosity based on various expressions of 'nature religion' involving the worship of immanent forms of the divine feminine. The cult of *Gaia*, the Mother Goddess and other eco-spiritual expressions of the divine is a way of reversing patriarchal religion and also a strategy for women's empowerment as well as the protection of the environment.

Even as ecofeminism points to 'the cross-pollinations of the social and the environmental'<sup>16</sup> by offering critiques of the ways in which the social and ecological worlds are gendered, the ecofeminist discourse has come under severe criticism for re-valuing the women-nature linkage that is still inscribed by hierarchical dualism. Critics argue that the eco-feminist idea of the positive synergism of women's gender interests and environmental interests seem to be strongly related to an essentialist denial of the social and historical construction of gender and nature.<sup>17</sup> The 'eco-fem' linking tends to be premised simplistically on sexual division of roles and responsibilities which are treated as essential and universal. It is also observed that 'environmental protests by rural women as in the case of Chipko cannot be disembodied from their livelihood systems, for threatened resources often mean threatened subsistence. This may well mobilize women to protest, but since the moral economy itself is imbued with gender inequality, such struggles are not necessarily progressive for women nor are they driven by environmentalism.'<sup>18</sup>

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15 Ynestra King, "The Ecofeminist Perspective" in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds.), *Reclaiming the Earth: Women Speak out for Life on Earth*, London: The Women's Press 1983, p.11 cited by Mies and Siva in *Ecofeminism*, p.14.

16 Chris J. Cuomo, *Feminism and Ecological Communities*, p.19.

17 Cf. Cecile Jackson, "Environmentalisms and Gender Interests in the Third World" in *Development and Change*, Vol.24 (1993) 649-677, here 660-661.

18 *Ibid.*, p.670.

## Denaturalizing nature's "gender" for a healed relationship with the earth

It is acknowledged more and more that the domination of the earth is related to other forms of social domination in the name of race, class, caste besides gender, thus bringing into relief Carolyn Merchant's assertion that domination is a key concept 'for understanding human-human and human-nature relationships'.<sup>19</sup> Hence, a healed relation to the earth demands a social reordering to bring about just and loving interrelationship between men and women, between races and nations, between groups presently stratified into social classes, manifest in great disparities of access to the means of life.<sup>20</sup> Many feminists suggest environmental-feminist theories rather than 'ecofeminism' for analyzing human-nature relationships,<sup>21</sup> as they insist that liberation of women from all forms of alienation and subjugation will inevitably be a deathblow of domination as such, since the full liberation of women requires a complete "transvaluation of values" that promises the liberation of the whole humanity and nature. Without the liberation of women, human liberation and the liberation of nature from exploitative control and manipulation are not possible'<sup>22</sup>

Different scholars have proposed different ideas for deconstructing the gendered notions of nature and women so that a healthier relationship with the earth can emerge. Bina Agarwal thinks that women's and men's relationship with nature needs to be understood as rooted in their specific form of interaction with the environment. Hence there is a need to challenge and transform the notions about gender and the

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19 Carolyn Merchant, *Ecology-Key Concepts in Critical Theory*, p.1.

20 Rosemary Radford Ruether insisting on a social reordering of relationships observes that ecology as a study suggests how humans must learn to live as a sustaining rather than destructive members of biotic communities. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of the Earth Healing*, London: SCM Press, p.2.

21,22 Eschewing both conventional and ecofeminist approaches, Sumi Krishna has proposed a novel concept of 'genderscapes' to reflect the totality of women's life-worlds and to revision natural resource management in complex landscapes. See Sumi Krishna, *Genderscapes: Revisioning Natural Resource Management*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2009.



actual division of work and resources between men and women. There is a need to challenge and transform not only notions about the relationships between people and nature, but also the actual methods of appropriation of nature's resources by a few. According to her, the notion of 'feminist environmentalism' addresses these different dimensions for a right relationship of humans with the earth.<sup>23</sup> For Ruether, rebuilding human society and a sustainable earth will require far more than a plethora of technological 'fixes' within the present paradigm of relations of domination. The technological advancements cannot be divorced from its social and psychic contexts and this calls for transformed political relations and cultural consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

Feminist environmentalist Val Plumwood suggests a critical scrutiny of the "complex cultural identity of the master"<sup>25</sup> as she insists that it is a "master" rather than merely masculine identity which is responsible for gender domination, and other forms of dominations as that of race, class, and species. She critiques Platonian and Cartesian mechanistic and instrumentalized conceptions of nature, as well as the 'Earth-Goddess' worship, and deep ecology. She asserts that goddesses, and other deifications of nature, robs "the great plurality of particular beings in nature" of their "own autonomy, agency, and ecological or spiritual meaning."<sup>26</sup> As an alternative to system of dualisms in Western thought such as, culture/nature, reason/nature, male/female, mind/body, master/slave, etc. which constructs difference "in terms of an inferior and alien realm", Plumwood proposes the notion of 'continuity and difference', which according to her, would be a "non- reductionist basis for recognizing continuity and reclaiming the ground of overlap between nature, body, and the human."<sup>27</sup>

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23 Marsha Aileen Hewitt, *Critical Theory of Religion: A Feminist Analysis*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, pp.216-217.

24 Cf. Bina Agarwal, "The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India", pp.73-75.

25 Cf. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of the Earth Healing*, pp 258-59.

26 Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1993, p.5 as reviewed by Stacy Alaimo in [www.electronicbookreview.com](http://www.electronicbookreview.com), accessed on 15 November 2009.

27 Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, p.128.

## Towards a "Partnership Ethic"<sup>28</sup>

Life on this planet is designed in such a manner that no organism is complete in itself but needs other forms of life for its sustenance and subsistence. Weaving right relationships between humans and the environment in this regard implies a culture of partnership. Partnership entails participation and a conscious sharing of responsibilities in the project of life. It becomes possible only in mutuality and with a spirit of inter-dependence between humans and other forms of life.

Affirming the 'difference and continuity' as well as nature's 'subjectivity and autonomy' in its connectedness with humans, becomes possible only when we are conscious of the sacredness of life. As Maria Mies says, life on earth can be preserved only if people begin to perceive all life forms as sacred and respect them as such. This quality is not located in an otherworldly deity or in a transcendence but in everyday life, in our work, in the things that surround us, in our immanence. Celebrating earth's sacredness helps to resist its transformation into dead raw material for industrialism and commodity production.<sup>29</sup> It is to recognize the continuity of the human consciousness with the radial energy of matter throughout the universe.<sup>30</sup> 'Dis-covering' the sacredness of life will help us humans to be in touch with the spirit, the life energy that lies in every being in its own form of existence, and thus be open to the Mystery beyond human possession and manipulation.

In conclusion, the partnership ethic that is proposed is founded on the principle that 'converting our minds to the earth cannot happen without converting our minds to each other.'<sup>31</sup> For this, we need to go

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28 *Ibid.*, p.123.

29 Stacy Alaimo. Review of Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare* in [www.electronicbookreview.com](http://www.electronicbookreview.com)

30 Cf. Shiva and Mies, *Ecofeminism*, p.17-19.

31 Ruether here is referring to Teilhard de Chardin's interpretation of evolution which sees the radial energy of matter developing along the lines of increasing complexity and centralization. Cf. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*. New York: Harper 1959, pp.53-74, in Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, Boston: Beacon Press 1983, pp.86-88.

beyond mere deconstruction of gender by putting together masculine and feminine qualities. As Mary Daly observes, attempts to combine masculinity and femininity which are patriarchal constructs will only result in pseudointegrity.<sup>32</sup> True integrity implies evolving the self in freedom beyond the fragmentation of social constructions and definitions which position humans against each other and the rest of creation.

Evolving a culture of partnership will help overcome the interpretation of differences in hierarchical and dualistic terms, and create the notion of interdependence, which is an essential key for transforming the *oikos* into a home. But feminist environmentalists also insist on liberating the home from its status as “women’s sphere” to that of “human habitat,”<sup>33</sup> as for many women, the home saturated with gender roles, ethereal ideals of motherhood, and hardly ethereal household chores, has long been a space of oppression and claustrophobia.<sup>34</sup> It follows then, that for re-discovering the ‘home’ the common dwelling place for humans and other organisms, the partnership ethic ought to challenge the liberal discourse of utilitarianism and locate relationality with the earth within the public discourse of solidarity. Undoing the age-old conditioning of utilitarian relationships is crucial for doing away with war and tyranny, what Virginia Woolf celebrates in *Three Guineas*, in order to light up the windows of the ‘home’.

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32 *Ibid.*, p.91.

33 Cf. Mary Daly *Gyn/Ecology...* p.387.

34 Cf. Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare*, p.166

35 Stacy Alaimo insists that the home needs to be deconstructed of its “femininity”. See Review of Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare*.

# Forest Discourses by Women: Earth-Centric Retellings of the Ramayana

Swarnalatha Rangarajan

The author is Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Chennai. In this contribution she applies a cultural ecofeminist lens to retellings of the Ramayana story by women which bring together women and nature, in a mutually co-operative relationship of giving, sharing and receiving. The article centres on recovery narratives embedded in these various vehicles of Sita's story ranging from folk songs to *Sitayanas* by writers like Ambai and Volga. Set in the forest, these *aranyakas* (forest discourses) function as sacred environmental texts which question Cartesian binaries and conceive of the feminine as a holistic ecosystem of integral interrelationships.

Nature in ancient Indian culture and religion abounds in expressions of geopiety, mediated through the symbol of the divine feminine. The image of the earth as a goddess, known as *Prithvi* is ancient and all pervasive. The *Prithvi Sukta* of the Atharva Veda established earth as the mother and the community of earth-beings as her children. The Vedas devoted a significant number of hymns to Aditi, mother of Gods, and the infinite, teeming womb of the cosmos. Rivers like Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswathi were worshipped as sacred feminine presences; *aranyanis*, *vanadevis* and *kshetradevis* were conceived



in the image of the feminine divine to pay homage to the sacredness of forests and local territories. The life-sustaining aspect of nature was personified as goddesses like *Annapurna* and *Sakhambhari*, deities associated with abundance of food and the great biodiversity of crops and vegetation.

This sacral vision of feminine geopiety gradually dwindled and was lost to the hoary civilization. With the advent of the industrial/developmental model there was a radical shift in conception from the Indian cosmological view of nature as *Prakriti*, the dynamic feminine creative principle responsible for the co-creation of the world with the masculine principle, *Purusha*. Shiva writes, "For women... the death of *Prakriti* is simultaneously a beginning of their marginalization, devaluation, displacement, and ultimate dispensability. The ecological crisis, at its root, is the death of the feminine principle."<sup>1</sup>

Ecofeminism, a term coined by French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, recognises the similarities in the patriarchal domination and oppression of women and nature. Ecofeminists have contributed to the understanding of gender identity by pointing out the construction of identity in a dualistic worldview is a complex issue since men and women are not merely defined as polarities but all that is associated with women is devalued and subordinated. The etymological roots of the word nature and culture illustrate the connection between masculine identity and the idea of storied development. Nature derives from the Latin "natura" meaning birth whereas culture derives itself from the Latin "colere" meaning to till or cultivate. Historically women have been associated with that which is born and men with that which is cultivated. Women's identities are associated with the unchanging raw aspect of nature whereas men's identities have been defined by narratives of transcendence.

Masculine identity in traditional epics across most cultures is achieved through a heroic battle with forces of evil or through the metaphor of hunting which involves the conquest and death of an "other." The

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1. Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival* (London: Zed Books, 1988) 42.

classic epic hero across different cultures in the world adheres to this pattern. For example, Rama slays Ravana or Apollo slays Gaia's python. On the other hand, feminine identity, according to ecofeminists, is best expressed through the feminine metaphors of quilting and gathering. Gathering involves the collection of life-sustaining ideas and practices, a coming together of multiple voices. Philosopher Karen Warren very succinctly conceptualizes an ecofeminist ethic of care: "An ecofeminist ethic not only recognizes the multiple voices of women, located differently by race, class, age and ethnic considerations. It centralizes those voices. Ecofeminism builds on the multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses"<sup>2</sup>

### *Women and Nature – A Co-operative Relationship*

This paper proposes to apply a cultural ecofeminist lens to retellings of the Ramayana story by women. The focus would be a woman's culture, which would draw on retellings of the Ramayana story which bring together women and nature, in a mutually co-operative relationship of giving, sharing and receiving. The focus in these retellings is what Mary Daly refers to as a return to a way of life where women feel themselves part of the eternal cycle of birth, growth, maturation and death and not outside it. It is also a valorization of the woman's culture which includes the body, emotions, and subjective feelings. The paper will center on recovery narratives embedded in the various vehicles of Sita's story ranging from folk songs to Sitayanas by writers like Ambai and Volga.

The Ramayana story has undergone a significant number of retellings over the past two thousand five hundred years. A.K. Ramanujan urges us to view these different tellings of the Ramayanas as totally individual stories and not as "divergences" from the "real version."<sup>3</sup>

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2. Karen Warren, "Ecological Feminism" *Hypatia*, 1992, 6:1 quoted in Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 195.
  3. A.K. Ramanujan, "The Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three thoughts on Translation" *Many Ramayanas* (Delhi: OUP, 1991) 22.

### ***Subversion of Ramayana by the Subalterns***

The folk versions of Ramayana subvert the patriarchal thrust of mainstream Ramayanas by choosing alternative ways of exploring the myth. If the mainstream versions of the Ramayana story silence women, these folk versions in languages like Telugu, Maithili, Bengali and Marathi give the village women a voice. These women use the myth of Sita to foreground their plight. However muted their voices may seem, the subalterns in this case speak, but they express themselves but under the cover of the dominant patriarchal ideology.

### ***Folk Versions of Ramayana – Episodic and Fragmentary***

Nabaneeta Dev Sen in her extensive study about the folk versions of the Ramayanas points out that the women's retellings of the *Ramayana* are episodic and fragmentary, keeping in tune with the fragmentary nature of their lives. They are not interested in the heroic epic cycle which has little relevance in their lives. If what they create is fragmentary, it is because their lives are fragmentary. Again the episodes which are favoured in these Ramayanas come from the books that are considered spurious by the classical Ramayana scholars. The main emphasis in these folk versions is on *Balakanda* (which deals with the birth and marriage of Sita) and *Uttarakanda* (which talks about what happened after the end of the war). These songs are sung by women when they are sowing and weeding in the fields or working in the courtyards or preparing for religious ceremonies. They talk about the important phases in a woman's life like romance, marriage, pregnancy, childbirth and abandonment. All the shining exploits of the epic hero's dharma are omitted in these folk versions. These women do not sing for the public; they sing for themselves. The epic poet sings of Rama whereas these women sing about Sita. These Ramayana songs make a statement against the public Ramayanas and the Bhakti Ramayanas which extol the values of a male-centric society.

### ***Sita in the Wilderness – In Exile***

The most poignant of these songs deal with Sita in the wilderness, cast away from the trappings of civilization. Nature is seen as a healing and helping presence who aids and comforts Sita in her sorrow. The folk songs repeatedly emphasize the point that Sita's nature is seen as

co-extensive with nature. The image of Sita as an abandoned infant and an alienated self-in-exile is a recurring leitmotif in these songs. In a Marathi folk song, Sita is depicted in forest exile, talking to the birds and trees. Sitabai says, "What kind of a woman am I?/ I was given away to Rama when I was five years old./What sort of mother's love have I got?/...Dear Plum tree, dear Babul tree./Sita is telling you the story of her life./Please listen... I was found at the tip of a plough./ How can I have parents?/I was found in a box, in the open field."<sup>4</sup>

It is a lone struggle for the woman. Sita's struggles in the forest are elevated to an epic importance in this Marathi song: Even her nearest ones choose to remain outside her painful experience, as expressed so well in this Marathi song:

"How did they do it?/It melts our blood into tears/Who is fighting so bravely in the forest?/Who is all alone?/ Rama is reading about Sita's exile/ In a book."<sup>5</sup>

This song offers a striking image of Rama's complete detachment from the travails of Sita. He is consciously portrayed as an outsider in this Ramayana tradition.

The folk songs in Maithili which speak of exile and abandonment strike a poignant note. Nature is portrayed as the compassionate midwife who helps Sita through her labour pains.

"Sita leaves the palace, opening the golden gates./ Sita walks to her forest exile/ Girls, exile is written for Sita./Sita goes one mile, she goes two miles, girls./ In the third mile the pain arises./ Now life wishes to be born, girls./ Call the midwife, quick! /The tree came out of the forest./ So, you are my friend, my well-wisher?/ You take my golden bangle then./ And cut the cord of the baby/Alas! if only Rama would understand!"<sup>6</sup> In a similar fashion, a Marathi folk song begins with the rhetorical question, "Where is the smoke coming from, in the dense forest?" The story of Sita's harsh childbirth in a bed of rocks is recounted

4. Nabaneeta Dev Sen, "When Women Retell the Ramayan" *Manushi*, Issue 108, 20.

5. *Ibid.*, 25.

6. *Ibid.*, 25.



with great emotional depth since the image of a woman giving birth alone in the wilderness becomes a synecdochal image of the harsh conditions of childbirth and poor health environment that the rural women of India have to contend with. The song ends with a reiteration of nature's empathy and kinship with Sita. "Sitabai has given birth./ The hills and the forests are rejoicing./She has no one else to call her own."<sup>7</sup>

Sita's exile is shared by these women irrespective of age, caste or period. When they sing about Sita, they share the burden of their own exile. A Marathi song proclaims that: " Sita's exile,/ Let us share it among ourselves./ Sita's exile,/ How many times will it happen?/Sita's exile,/ Is happening every moment, everywhere."<sup>8</sup>

Sita's exile in the forest has been the focus of the Sitayanas written by Ambai and Volga. These stories are *aranyakas* – forest texts with a difference. Although nature is a term that is not of itself threatening, the idea of wild in civilized societies - both European and Asian - is associated with unruliness, wildness, and disorder. Gary Snyder, the poet of deep ecology, defines wilderness as:

a place where the original and potential vegetation and fauna are intact and in full interaction and the landforms are entirely the result of nonhuman forces. Of societies, primary societies whose order has grown from within and is maintained by force of consensus and custom rather than explicit legislation, of individuals - self-reliant, independent, of behaviour - artless, free, spontaneous unconditioned.<sup>9</sup>

In the Hindu tradition, *vanaprasthi*, the penultimate *ashrama* of life, the householder departs to the forest to prepare himself for a truly spiritual life. The retreat to the forest acts as a link between *brahmacharya*, *grahastya* and the final stage *sanyasa*.

### Ambai's Forest and Sitayana

Ambai's *Forest* crafts two Sitayanas: one is about the story of a

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7. *Ibid.*, 26

8. *Ibid.*, 26.

9. Gary Snyder. *The Gary Snyder Reader* (Berkeley: Countpoint Press 2000) 171-72.

middle-aged woman called Chenthiru who retreats from her family to the forest to find herself and the pregnant Sita of the epic who is led to the wilderness by Lakshmana, who has the unpleasant task of abandoning her at the behest of his brother's orders.

Chentiru's husband reasons with her that the forest was a very unusual goal for women. It was the epic men who went into the forest on their own to destroy women. As for women, they could only be in the position of Sita or it was most appropriate for a woman to be a *rishi-pattini*, spouse of a sage, journeying along with her husband. "For a woman, a forest is a place where she cannot find her way. Everything there- trees, deer, flowers,- is bound to mislead her and make her lose her direction. For a woman, the forest is a means of punishment."<sup>10</sup>

However Chenthiru defies these assumptions and retires to the forest to write herself into being. As a parallel story, Ambai gives us the image of Sita writing her *ayanam* on palm-leaves, ruminating on herself and the events of her birth. When Sage Valmiki questions her about the objective of her writing, she replies, "A life story, Sita's *ayanam*!"

The sage is puzzled and asks her whether the Ramayana he wrote was not sufficient. Sita points out that in the ages to come there will be many Ramayanas and many Ramas and Sitas. Sita emphasizes that the Ramayana that she is going to craft will be different from the discourse of Valmiki's who was a poet of the king's court and created history. Her Ramayana would spring out of her experiences as a woman and be launched in the minds of forest dwellers.

Ambai's heroines embark upon this quest for self-individuation. Chenthiru comes alive to the multiple harmonies of the forest. She finds joy in developing camaraderie with the rustic women she meets in the forest and learns to appreciate simple wholesome acts like eating and walking and drinking deep of water stored in jars which reflect the unclouded full moon. She finds the answer to her quest in the words of a Muslim saint, an expert *vina* player, who lives in a small hut in the

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10. Ambai, "Forest" *In a Forest, A Deer* (Delhi: OUP 2006) 147.

forest, an expert *vina* player provides the answer to her quest. When she complains that she cannot breathe in Mumbai, the saint replies, "Mumbaï can follow you here. And the forest too can go with you to Mumbai."<sup>11</sup>

In her counterpart Sita's life, the forest leads her to a new threshold of awareness. Her abandonment is complete since the young boys, Lava and Kusa, opt to go Rama back to Ayodhya, the moment they recognize him as their father. Sita however refuses to go along with Rama and her sons although Rama pleads with her. She says that her journey lies in a different direction. There are denunciations and appeals but Sita cannot recover from her sense of having gone deep under the earth. She walks into the heart of the forest and immerses herself in the kaleidoscopic play of nature: deer drinking at a stream, deer-eating tigers. Like Chenthiru, she is drawn by the strains of *vina* music and traces the source of music to a small hut whose inhabitant looks like a sage. It is none other than Ravana who claims that he did not die in the war. He claims that he was transformed into a parrot by Rama - a tired old parrot waiting for the moment that he would meet with Sita. Sita wearily remarks that she was tired of all these games of infatuation. She reasons with Ravana that he had no reason to be still infatuated with her since she was more than forty years old. Ravana reassures her that it is precisely in middle age that a woman needs a friend to support and encourage her when she is distressed by her changing body.

Sita is not convinced and wearily remarks that words leave her crippled and that she is fettered by her body. Ravana takes on the role of a guru and offers an enlightened discourse on the body both as a medium of imprisonment as well as a means of freedom. Drawing on the ancient vision of feminine geopiety he makes a parallel between the *rudravina* and the body of the goddess:

A musical instrument that was created by imagining what wonderful music would sound, if Parvati's breasts, as she lay on her back, turned into gourds, and their nipples attached by

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11. *Ibid.*, 174.

strings. It is an extension of the Devi's body ... Don't think of it as an ordinary music instrument. Think of it as your life and play on it.<sup>12</sup>

As Ravana lifts the *rudravina* from his lap and stretches it out towards her, Sita quietly instructs him to leave it on the ground. Her concluding lines are:

"It is my life, isn't it? A life that many hands have tossed about like a ball. Now, let me take hold of it, take it into my hands"<sup>13</sup>

These new stories talk about the sacredness of the body and how inhabiting one's body is an important way of being at "home". These stories become very important in a culture that defines both the human female body and the land as "resource", as someone else's "property".

### *Volga's Story on Reunion*

The discourse of the body is given an ecofeminist focus by the Telugu writer Volga in her short story, *Reunion*. This story envisions a feminist-inspired forest alternative to urban society. Like in Ambai's story, Volga goes against authoritative retellings of the *ramakatha* which portray Sita and Shurpanaka as opposites. When a woman like Shurpanaka performs a wrong deed, it is ascribed to her female nature, whereas Ravana's evil deeds are never said to spring from his male nature. It is also worth noting that in the Bhakti Ramayanas, the evil doings of male characters are recast

as devotional acts leading to eventual salvation, Shurpanaka's salvation is not mentioned. From a narrative point of view, Shurpanaka's mutilation serves as a catalyst to the key events. From a cultural perspective, the episode sheds light on mainstream culture's attitudes to female sexuality and its relationship to such polarities such as good and evil. Volga imagines them meeting late in life and realizing how much they have in common. Volga depicts the forest as a space where an individual can come to terms with the past through self-analysis and reflection.

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12. *Ibid.*, 177.

13. *Ibid.*, 178.



### *Shurpanaka – From Beautiful to Disfigured Body*

Beautiful exotic flowers brought for the evening worship by Lava and Kusa arouse Sita's curiosity. When the boys explain to Sita that the owner of the garden is extremely ugly, without a nose or ears, Sita realizes that they are speaking about Shurpanaka whom Rama and Lakshmana defaced. Her heart is overcome with pity for Ravana's sister and she goes to meet her. In the conversation that follows Shurpanaka offers a moving account of her inner transformation. After the disfigurement, the once-beautiful Shurpanaka becomes the object of ridicule. She starts hating everything that is beautiful. In Shurpanaka's case, the forest plays the role of a causal guru or a *karanaguru* who facilitates the transformation by raising the level of ordinary consciousness to a state which experiences the universal consciousness. Shurpanaka eloquently describes the great battle that she had to fight within herself to find the essence of form and deformity.

"I labored hard to realize the oneness of form and deformity in nature. I observed all forms of life. I observed in their stillness and their movement. I discovered the secret of colours. I've observed every nook and corner of nature. That observation transformed my eyes. To those eyes everything appeared beautiful. I had developed hatred towards everything including myself, but now I started loving everything including myself."<sup>14</sup>

Shurpanaka goes on to talk about her labour with flowers, the ways in which her creative work had paid rich dividends in the world of nature. At the end of the story, she asks Sita about her future. Sita replies that her future lay with her sons, but Shurpanaka reminds her that once they know that they are the king's heirs, the boys will migrate from the forest towards civilization and the cities. Realizing the inevitability of the situation, Sita replies that in that case she will take refuge with the Mother Earth. It is then that Shurpanaka advises her, pointing out:

"Sita, where is it that you don't have your mother? However, I think her form is more beautiful here than anywhere else."<sup>15</sup>

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14. Volga, "Reunion" in *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) 96-97.

15. *Ibid.*, 98.

Sita sees the point and assures Shurpanaka that when her children leave her for the city, she would once again become the daughter of this earth and find a new meaning in her life, meditating beneath the cool shades of the trees in the forest near Shurpanaka's nursery. Rather than entertain a self-defeating vision of suicide or the pain of an empty nest, Sita envisages a continuing life in the midst of nature with a friend working nearby.

The forest, Shurpanaka is talking about is not merely a metaphor. To quote Gary Snyder again, "People of wilderness rarely seek out adventures. If they deliberately risk themselves, it is for spiritual rather than economic reasons."<sup>16</sup>

### **Conclusion**

These eco-centric Sitayanas not only break down the Cartesian binaries of intellect/emotion, civilization/wilderness, becoming/being but they also conceive of the feminine as a holistic ecosystem in which everything is connected to everything else. Various retellings of the epic celebrate not merely the feminine principle, but also its relationship to the biotic and the a-biotic. Rocks, deer and flowers are integrated in a synergetic relationship with feminine principle of *prakriti* which complements and nourishes the male principle, *purusha*. These tales hint at a powerful solution for our troubled times, what ecofeminist, Carolyn Merchant, refers to as "partnership ethics" – a society based on a partnership model between men and women and nature.

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16. Gary Snyder, *The Gary Snyder Reader* (Berkeley:Countepoint Press, 2000) 181.

# **Ecological Significance of Jesus' Use of Nature Images**

**V. J. John**

The author is Professor at Bishop's College, Kolkatta. He shows in this contribution the affinity of Jesus and the content of his teaching with nature and its processes. Nature images of Jesus are closely related to the encounter with God and God's revelation. They become as well the key to understand the subversion of the unjust societal order the Rule of God is going to effect. As a person immersed in the Palestinian life, he identifies himself "with the peasant culture, with its values of sharing, caring and hard work".

## **Introduction**

It has been generally recognized by all who are attracted by the person and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth that his teachings are among the most appealing, of any religious teachers, for its simplicity and truthfulness. The rustic nature of his teachings, together with their straightforwardness of style and arresting character, with correspondence to everyday events in an oral cultural milieu, in a rural, agrarian setting in ancient Palestine, makes them interesting for any discerning reader. The many themes that Jesus touches upon in his teachings include imageries that relate to kingship, family life, relationships in society, and the role of nature and human relationships with the natural order. The parables and miracles of Jesus portray

nature in real terms as experienced in daily occurrences of life. His association with farm life through upbringing and personal engagement made him realize that it is from the bounties and vitalities of nature that life is sustained. Images and metaphors drawn from nature thus came naturally to him as medium in proclaiming the rule of God (Mk. 1:14-15), to an audience predominantly consisting of peasants and others who belonged to the deprived and alienated social groups.<sup>1</sup> The images drawn from farming, shepherding and fishing activity, brought to their perception in down-to-earth fashion, the close connection between their life's engagement, the work of nature and divine activity. Hence the meaning of the divine rule that Jesus proclaimed cannot be understood for its total worth detached from its ecological connection. We shall look upon the nature images used by Jesus for its ecological significance in relation to three aspects: namely, its emphasis upon the agricultural process as an ecological activity, the stress on the role of nature towards the promotion and sustenance of life, and the function of nature as witness to the rule of God.

### 1. The Agricultural Process as an Ecological Activity

The peasant life brings a person in constant relationship with nature unlike any other human engagement. The effect of the human on landmass is felt as one engages in raising crops and grazing animals. It was through the practice of agricultural activities that humans learned to relate to fellow-beings and nature and to order the course of their life. It is both an essential activity and one that has great effect on everything else. This meant viewing nature as having life and humanity as being related to it.<sup>2</sup> In Schumacher's view, goals of agriculture should be directed

... to keep [hu]man in touch with living nature, of which [s/]he is and remains a highly vulnerable part; to humanize and ennoble

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- 1 Other than peasants, those whom Jesus ministered from the lower strata of society included: sinners (Mk. 2:15), prostitutes (Lk. 7:37; Mt. 21:32), the sick (Mk. 1:40; 2:3), the widows. See *Nazareth—Hoffnung der Armen* 2 Aufl. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1981), pp. 24-30.
  - 2 P. B. Thompson, *The Spirit of the Soil: Agricultural and Ecumenical Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.



[hu]man's wider habitat; and to bring forth the foodstuffs and other materials which are needed for a becoming life.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, over against human activity, the role of nature stands out as the focus of the agricultural parables of Jesus that make use of several farming images. Jesus' encounter with farm life in an oppressive social setting becomes the basis of his articulation of the divine through the agricultural parables and nature miracles. They mediate to the audience of Jesus, this experience of the divine rule<sup>4</sup> as in the case of the parable of the Soil (Mk. 4:3-9), the Good Earth (Mk. 4:26-29), the Transforming Earth (Mk. 4:30-32), and the Leaven (Lk. 13:20-21).<sup>5</sup>

The imageries of seed, soil and harvest repeatedly stressed in the agricultural parables take into its view the entire agricultural season. The cycle begins with the sowing of the seed, the quality of which determines the kind of harvest produced at the end of the season. The soil too plays an important role towards sustaining the growth of what is sown. If the soil is marginal farm land, the hard work of the peasant cultivator may not yield the desired harvest (Mk. 4:1-9). Besides the farmer had to overcome the vagaries of nature and wait patiently for the fruit of one's labour. The urgency of the farmer or the hard work one put in did not determine even the timing of the harvest. After a natural process of germination and growth that appears to be cyclical, harvest comes in its due season. In the meantime the farmer could only wait patiently,<sup>6</sup> trusting in the divine providence for a fruitful harvest. Throughout the farming operation, human patience is tested with unproductive land, problem of weed, failure of rains and attacks from pests, and enemies of crops (cf. GThom.9). Through the passing of

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3 E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 113.

4 C. H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1935), pp. 32-33.

5 Dodd, *Parables*: p. 82ff. Cf. J. Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1995), pp. 70-71.

6 Recognizing this fact B. T. D. Smith terms the parable of Mk. 4: 26-29 as the Parable of the Patient Husbandman. See his *Parables of the Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge: CUP. 1937), pp. 129ff.

the seasons and the process of development of the sown seed, humans do not have much to do with the growth process except to cooperate with the activity of nature (Mk. 4: 26-29; 30-31).

Though farmers have a vital role to play in the sowing and harvesting, as well as in the intermediary stages of plant growth (*tShab* 10 (9). 17, 19; *pShab* 12.1.13c), yet, there is also a time when the peasant sits back and let Mother Nature do its work. Borsch reminds us, "some people more than others need to be reminded that humans also have a more passive role to play in the creation—one of listening, admiring, sitting on the porch, and looking out over the fields."<sup>7</sup> As the peasant sits back Mother Nature does her work. Activity and passivity together determine the completion of the natural process. Both, "the earth produces of *itself* (*automate*)" (Mk. 4: 28) and "when the grain *is ripe* (passive verb: *paradoi*)" (Mk. 4: 29), according to Perrin, suggests the natural operation.<sup>8</sup> Since the principle of growth comes from God, it can neither be rushed, nor could be improved upon. One has to simply wait for them to occur.

The regular appearance of the seasons without failure essential for farming activity was credited to the divine favour. It is the providential care of God that sends the rains both on the godly and the ungodly making the seeds to germinate and grow and dew for the growth of the fruit.<sup>9</sup> Unfriendly climatic conditions so common in the context of Palestine where rains were scanty and seasonal, each time there was a delay of rain, there was crop failure. Looking at the long process that the seed had to endure and the helplessness of the farmer in expediting any of this process along with the long wait, Jeremias described it as "a hopeless prospect!"<sup>10</sup> But divine grace and

7 F. H. Borsch, *Many Things in Parables: Extravagant Stories of New Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), p. 123.

8 N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 159.

9 G. Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine, First Three Centuries CE*, University of California Publications, Near Eastern Studies, Vol. 23 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 104.

10 J. Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke, rev. ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1963), p. 150.

providential care see to it that the seed despite its enemies, grow, flower and bring forth a harvest. A yield of thirty, sixty, and a hundred fold is a symbolization of the "divine fullness" of the eschatological period experienced in the present that surprises all human expectations. It is in thanksgiving for God's faithfulness in providing right seasons and climate to carry out the agricultural processes that the agricultural festivals were celebrated. Often it was accompanied by the offerings of the people. The harvest thanksgiving, too, celebrated God's faithfulness in providing a bountiful harvest. The agricultural parables (Mk. 4:1-9; 26-29; 30-32) that lay stress on the process of agriculture as an ecological activity of divine providence highlight the divine role in the process of nature. Further, it calls for human co-operation with nature so that working in tandem with the ecological processes, human experiences that adversely affect the orderly function of nature may be reversed in the reaping of a bountiful harvest.

## 2. Nature Sustains and Promotes Life

The images of nature that Jesus makes use in his parables and miracles stress the role of nature and natural surroundings for the growth and well being of all life. The requirement of air, water, food and habitat is met from the context within which life is situated. Disturbances and decay of the natural setting affects the very survival of life. Climate and soil are the two important aspects of agriculture in any context. Hamel points out that it was even more so in Palestine and the rest of the Mediterranean basin.<sup>11</sup> Since rains were scarce, their regularity was essential for the success of a farmer's labour. The combination of the timing, the volume of rain received, as well as its penetration into the soil, is all to be held in a delicate balance. It is interesting to note that in comparing the word of God to a fruitful harvest, Isaiah draws upon the imagery from the work of nature.

For as rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall be my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not

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11 Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine*, pp. 101ff.

return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Is. 55: 10-11, NRSV)

The regular appearance of the seasons without failure was credited to the divine favour. It is the providential care of God that sends the rains both on the godly and the ungodly making the seeds to germinate and grow, and causes the dew for the growth of the fruit.<sup>12</sup> Unfriendly climatic conditions so common in the context of Palestine where rains were scanty and seasonal, each time there was a delay of rain, there was crop failure. Next to rain comes in importance, the soil. Quality of soil determines the kind of harvest; good soil yielding a bountiful harvest while poor quality soil hinders it. Hamel observes,

The soil structure falls into three main categories: rather naked and rough mountaintops; slopes that have been smoothed and covered with deposits of limestone, sandstone, or marly clay, and small alluvial plains. In summer the mountaintops and hills are mostly used by the shepherds. The slopes carry planted (olives, vineyards) and sown crops. The alluvial plains are suitable for more crops and garden vegetables, especially when properly irrigated.<sup>13</sup>

Divine grace and providential care see to it that the seed despite its enemies, grow, flower and bring forth a harvest. The agricultural process when accompanied by the ecological process of productive soil and favourable climatic conditions bring forth a bumper harvest testifying to the divine potential for a reversal of the peasant experience. The symbolism of the tree with its various associations in the biblical tradition, include bringing forth leaves and bearing fruit, both activities aided by nature. Jesus' use of the symbolism in the Gospels stresses the vitality of the tree and the need to be natural in bringing forth good deeds like the fruit-bearing tree.

The parable of leaven (Mt. 13:33) too underscores the aspect of growth. Leaven was a fermenting agent similar to yeast and was added to a batch of bread dough, by adding an unbaked portion of dough

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12 G. Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine*, p. 104.

13 Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine*, p. 102.



saved from the previous batch. It is considered to be a vital portion of the vegetable world just as blood is of the animal world. The feast of the unleavened bread, originally associated with an agricultural celebration (cf. Josh. 5:11-12), marked the gathering of the first crop, signifying a new beginning and therefore eaten afresh without any leaven from the previous harvest.<sup>14</sup> But the emphasis of the parable is on the hidden transformation that is brought about by leaven, as in the case of the mustard seed.<sup>15</sup> While leaven is generally understood in the Old Testament and in parts of the New Testament for its negative influence, the aspect of neutrality is not to be missed. The stress in the parables of Jesus appears to be more on the positive aspect of leaven as a powerful life force (Mt. 13:33; Lk. 13:20-21). Small though it is, leaven is essential for making the loaf. The insignificant beginning of the kingdom of God contrasted to its final manifestation in greatness, is the stress here as well as in the other growth parables.<sup>16</sup>

The miraculous catch of fish (Lk. 5:1-11; Jn. 21:1-14), calming the raging sea (Mt. 8:23-27), feeding the multitude (Mk. 6:30-44; 8:1-9), and turning water into wine (Jn. 2:1-11) are among Jesus' nature miracles. They either lay stress on the natural phenomena as obstructive to the sustenance of life, when out of control, or emphasize the role of natural resources in promoting life. The divine rule operates in a way similar to that of the outworking of the natural processes that sustains life. Unlike the stress on a sudden outbreak of the rule of God in the apocalyptic concept of the Kingdom of God, the nature parables emphasize its gradual appearance, one step leading to the other until it reaches the final stage of fulfillment. The parable of the Soil has been called a 'parable on parables' because of the life of God that it witnesses to through an abundant harvest.<sup>17</sup> At the arrival of the harvest, the

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14 "Leaven", *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Paul J. Achtemeier, Gen. Ed., (Bangalore: TPI, 1990), pp. 552-53.

15 Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (London: SCM, 1993), p. 103.

16 J.D. Kingsbury, *The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969), p. 86.

17 J.A. Findlay, *Jesus and His Parables* (London: The Religious Book Club, 1951), p. 20.

peasant is overjoyed for the opportunity for his involvement in the creative process of producing something.<sup>18</sup>

Elsewhere Jesus' teachings that draw lessons from nature, such as, vine and branches, shepherd and sheep, salt and light, sun and moon, sand and rock, lilies and plants, birds and fish; all have their focus on nature as it works in its rhythm and character as ordered by its creator for the promotion and maintenance of life. The order in natural phenomenon with its regular seasons and rain are a witness to God's dealing with nature (Deut. 11:14-17). The Psalms refer to the phenomenon in nature that bears witness to God's ways in nature (Ps. 19:1-6; 104; 148). In 1 Enoch 2-5, the regularity of nature is invoked to reprove humankind for the lack of congruity in their behaviour. The sun, the moon, the seas, the rivers all function in their order, endlessly without a pause. There is regularity and faithfulness of the created order in performing their task without disruption.<sup>19</sup> In IV Ezra, nature serves as a "paradigm of regularity". The various natural phenomena are employed by the author to compare and contrast the order in nature as against the unfaithfulness of human actions.<sup>20</sup>

Luke 12:54-56 is a condemnation of the hypocrisy of the people in their inability to read the signs of the moral and spiritual storm that erupts even as they interpret nature's signs of approaching storm and heat.<sup>21</sup> Clouds coming from the west arising out of the Mediterranean Sea is read as laden with moisture that would result in rain. Similarly a southern wind blowing from the desert brings with it the desert heat. If it were from the southeast, it could result in dry winds and oppressive heat.<sup>22</sup> In the Indian village settings even today the farmers are the

18 Thompson, *The Spirit of the Soil*, p. 47.

19 Ben Sira 16:26-28.

20 M.E. Stone, "The Parabolic Use of Natural Order", in *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra*, Hermenia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 340ff.

21 D. Gooding, *According to Luke* (IVF; Eerdmans, 1987), p. 248.

22 R.H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (The Westminster Press, 1981), p. 96.

best forecasters of the weather and the onset of rains, etc., that help them determine the times of various agricultural activities including ploughing, sowing, fertilizing, weeding and harvesting. The accusation against the multitude is that they are well versed in reading the signs of natural phenomena which in themselves are a witness to God's own nature and dealing with humans and the entire created order: yet they fail to comprehend the signs of the present time which forecast the moral and spiritual storm already brewing on the horizon.

Agriculture efforts should therefore be directed towards co-operating with nature. It is to be characterized by "frugality, care, security in diversity, ecological sensitivity, [and] correctness of scale."<sup>23</sup> Human experience of frustration and pain as well as joy and happiness in the agricultural process and the miraculous divine intervention in the processes of nature serve as signs of divine activity that witness to the rule of God. Patient waiting as against instant success, providential care despite human helplessness, and plenitude against poverty and starvation, testify to a reversal of normal experiences of the peasant community. The process of farming activity and other engagements with nature thus serves as a sign of the arrival of the divine rule to the marginalised Galilean peasants. The success at the end of a long-drawn process of the agricultural season comes from the divine care. Divine initiatives and the process of nature when aligned in harmonious outworking, it helps promote life. When the process of nature causes destruction and loss through human interference or otherwise, divine intervention aids to restore the same.

### 3. Nature Witness to the Rule of God

The association of Jesus with the farm life has led him to view the divine working from the perspective of the work of nature. Jesus' use of nature images in his parables and teachings and his miraculous interventions in the working of nature for the preservation and protection of life explain to Jesus' audience the concept of the rule of God in very tangible and down-to-earth terms.<sup>24</sup> Parables drawn from the daily

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23 W. Berry, *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), p. 41.

24 H. C. Kee, *Community of the New Age* (London: SCM, 1977), p. 94.

experiences of the peasant life, in the first century Palestine,<sup>25</sup> lay stress on the close connection between ordinary day-to-day experiences in life and the message concerning the divine rule. In his articulation and engagement nature serves as a medium for the perception of God's dealings with humanity.

In Jesus' understanding nature is no longer looked upon for its utility value but for its intrinsic worth. The everyday occurrences in human life in a given social and ecological context, becomes the locus of Jesus' teachings. In such a context, "the earthly imagery"<sup>26</sup> of everyday mundane existence became more meaningful. Jesus' choosing to use the images derived from nature in his communication of the divine rule indicts the human attempts to measure the worth of nature in terms of its utility value. The agricultural activity with which the audience of Jesus was most familiar had become the context from which Jesus has drawn his metaphors that explained the rule of God. Analogy of seed, soil, harvest, tree, leaven as well as bread, wine and wind all became channels for the perception of divine working. As a means of communicating divine activity, therefore, nature has its own value. It does not merely exist for the sake of humanity, as a resource to be exploited, but for its own sake and as witness to God and his benevolent activity of care. The soil, the seed, the process of growth and development, and the harvest are all images that are used with reference to the divine rule. Nature and resources of nature, therefore, are to be looked upon as sacred, rather than as a mere agent of utility for human needs, towards which human beings are called to relate with a sense of duty.<sup>27</sup>

However, nature is not only an epitome of divine favour and blessings but also a manifestation of divine wrath. God's dealings with humanity are witnessed at times in the fury of nature, often perceived as divine

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25 Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 11.

26 Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966), p. 156.

27 Thompson, *The Spirit of the Soil*, p. 9.



punishment. Thus, nature serves as an epitome of divine happiness or displeasure with the affairs of humanity from ancient times. The great Flood of Noah was thought of as a divine punishment. Similarly drought, famine, pestilence, locust and war were signs of divine anger against human disobedience and sin. The earth brings forth thorns and thistles instead of fruitfulness and plenty. There is an element of mystery that the parables seem to contain. The parables and the other nature related teachings of Jesus through the use of various imageries not only speak of the essential role of nature in making the earth habitable, but also in revealing the presence of God in the natural world.

## Conclusion

The parables of nature are an indictment of the rich and the powerful who held the poor under their control along with their possession. The land that produced plenty was turned into a source of perennial problem for the peasants under the new dispensation. This was going to be overturned sooner than expected. God is going to make every land fertile. The longing for a regular harvest on the part of the peasants is to be fulfilled. It is in the sharing of the resources that the powerful and mighty can align themselves on the side of the divine rule. In its emphasis on the aspect of reversal with the arrival of the rule of God, the nature images testify to Jesus' identification with the peasant culture, with its values of sharing, caring and hard work. He has even shared with the rural peasant class in his denouncement against the Herodian urban culture<sup>28</sup> that deprived the poor of their means of livelihood and marginalised them even as the urban centres enjoyed the fruit of their labour. In such a world, making use of images derived from familiar experience within the world of nature, Jesus subverts and explodes "myths that build or maintains structures, values, and expectations that thwart the actualization of God's rule . . ." <sup>29</sup> Jesus' parables use nature

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28 S. Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 143-45; R. Horsley, *Archaeology, History and Society in Galilee: The Social Context of Jesus and the Rabbis* (Valley Forge, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1996), pp. 83ff.

29 H. C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 110.

as a paradigm of divine encounter wherein we experience God's goodness and bounty although fury and destruction can be witnessed at times, primarily caused by human intervention. Thus Jesus' use of various imageries drawn from nature speak of the integral ecological connection implied by them, thereby making the earth habitable, as well as its role in revealing the presence of God in the natural world. Humans, therefore, have no right to exploit nature as mere resources for consumption but help preserve it in an appropriate equilibrium for the sake of the survival of the posterity and as a divine witness.

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*Current Events*

**The Copenhagen Summit**  
*The Birth Pangs for a Different Earth*

**Felix Wilfred**

The mountain was in travail and brought forth a mouse – so goes a popular saying. Was it the case of Copenhagen Summit? After a long and laborious preparation, and hectic negotiation among the representatives of over 170 nations during almost two weeks (6 – 18 December, 2009) and after having raised so much hope, what resulted was a contested political text without teeth. It fell far short of the expectations of a legally binding instrument committing developed and developing nations alike to substantially reduce carbon emission, and bringing the global warming not more than 2 degree centigrade from pre-industrial times. A weak text though, it saved the Summit from becoming a complete flop and kept alive the flicker of hope for the future. As the UN general secretary said “The Copenhagen Accord may not be anything everyone hoped for, but this document ...is an important beginning”.

The hope, I think, is not so much from the final text as in the whole process of debates and negotiations Copenhagen witnessed. Unlike in most international dealings of this kind at this Summit the usual arm-twisting of the developed countries vis-à-vis the poor nations could not take place; nor the strategy of secrecy and confabulations of the rich nations to have their way could succeed. Instead, perhaps for the first

time, the developing nations stood up to the wealthy ones and spoke in one voice, and all attempts to split them failed. Even the voices of small island nations resounded in the Summit hall. At the opening day itself the little Tuvalu island nation could create a sensation by walk-out after drawing attention to how it, like many other small islands, is hit by global warming and is in danger of being submerged, and insisting on creating binding commitments to reduce carbon emission. The concerns of the developing nations were ably represented by the BASIC countries – Brazil, South Africa, India and China, in spite of the inner differences within the developing nations. These countries had greater negotiating clout with the developed nations headed by the USA.

There were three or four major issues around which the debates centered. First of all, Copenhagen had a very important source and point of reference: This was the *Kyoto Protocol*. It had put forth a legally binding mechanism by which the richer nations which are responsible for most carbon emission in the world are to take up mandatory measures to reduce it significantly. Think of USA which with only 4% of world population, emits 30% of all greenhouse gas emissions. But the rich nations refused to be bound by the Kyoto Protocol, and were trying to wriggle out. There was an attempt to write the obituary for Kyoto Protocol. Kyoto Protocol of 1997 falls within United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Initially adopted on 11 December 1997, it was subsequently signed and ratified by 187 states – but, curiously, not by the United States. No wonder that USA and other wealthy nations prepared death-certificate for Kyoto Protocol. On the other hand, the developing nations found the conformity to Kyoto Protocol very important for the future of the earth, and were trying to exert pressure on the rich countries to follow it, and that explains one of the serious conflicts that took place in Copenhagen.

A second major issue concerned the *verification or transparency*. The various nations, developed and developing ones, were willing to take upon themselves measures to mitigate pollution and thus contribute to bring down the warming of the globe. But there was justifiable fear that good intentions and voluntary measures may not produce any tangible results. Hence it was important that the means taken up by



the different countries are internationally monitored and verified on a quantitative basis. The economically advanced countries were trying to pin down fast developing countries like China and India – which continue to emit much carbon in the air owing to their expanding industrial and economic enterprises – and make sure through international monitoring that they effectively reduce emission. This became a point of contention by India, China and others who were not ready to any such verification which they thought would be an infringement of their sovereignty. When negotiations got dead-locked the BASIC countries relented, and were amenable to be transparent in the measures they practice for reduction of carbon emission by reporting about what efforts have been taken by them and with what results. And this saved Copenhagen from becoming a complete failure.

A third question was that of the work of reparation, namely how to finance the cleaning up of the accumulating pollution and come to terms with the ecological consequences of the same. Against the fact that it is the richest nations that are also the worst polluters and the fact that the poor countries are the ones who suffer most the consequences of climate change, there was a legitimate demand that the affluent nations also pay to the poor countries affected by ecological disasters. Here again the reactions of rich countries initially was to challenge the claims of the poor nations. But the question of ecological compensation could not be avoided. And this was important also to save the Summit. It is at this point that United States promised to contribute to a fund of wealthy nations to the tune of U.S. \$ 100 billion after the year 2020 for the benefit of the developing countries. But then short term funding of U.S. \$ 30 billion will be given to the developing countries to face the crisis of climate change. This is also included in the final agreement of Copenhagen. How earnestly this promise is going to be fulfilled remains to be seen. But some would wonder whether the developing nations have traded off their souls for “thirty pieces of silver”. To avoid any such impression, greater pressure needs to be exerted on wealthy nations to substantial commitments for environmental cause, going beyond monetary assistance.

I referred to the collective action of developing countries in unmasking the machinations of the wealthy nations and laying bare

the ground-realities. I must add also the vigorous involvement of innumerable voluntary groups and Non-Governmental Organizations several of whom participated in the Summit and also brought to international awareness ecological issues through their ingenious forms of public protests. The various movements from below have contributed a lion's share in making global warming a subject matter of international debate and negotiation. The new confidence of the poor nations and the engagement of these organizations augur well for the future, and we may hope that an international treaty will soon come into effect, obliging all nations, especially the richer ones, to substantially reduce carbon emissions. It calls for a stronger political will than what appears to be there at present.

Finally, for the ecological concern of the Copenhagen to make any headway, the nations need to go beyond the question of reducing emission. The root of this problem is the present model of development and the culture of consumerism which puts a strain on the Earth and its carrying capacity, and ultimately the liberal capitalism which promotes these practices intensely at the global level. In other words, there is no ultimate solution for the climate change without challenging the reigning liberal capitalism and market economy. But unfortunately, the Summit did not take up these issues for debate and discussion, caught up as it was in finding ways to mitigate the carbon emission and overcome the immediate ecological crisis. We may only hope that the negotiations that will follow Copenhagen will go into the deeper causes of global warming and challenge forcefully liberal capitalism driven by market and competition.